

A Mosque Among the Stars



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A MOSQUE AMONG THE STARS

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&

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Introduction

Muhammad Aurangzeb Ahmad

The current anthology has its roots in the Islam and Science Fiction website. When one of us, Muhammad Aurangzeb Ahmad, first started the website a couple of years ago he had not anticipated that the overwhelming positive response that the website would get. The scope of the website was to explore and document the range of depictions of Islam and Muslims in the Science Fiction literature. The idea of Anthology was conceived by one of us, Ahmed A. Khan who is a Canadian Science Fiction author. We both immediately recognized the need and usefulness of this Endeavour. It is an opportunity to present Islam and Muslims in a different light. Islam is an often-misunderstood religion. The media often presents a somewhat caricatured picture of Muslims which cannot be further from the truth. At the same time there are people who do use Islam for their own deranged purposes. However the overwhelming majority of Muslims throughout the world are peace loving people and are as diverse as any other group of people.

Science Fiction has sometimes been described as a quintessentially American genre of fiction. Although biased, the view however conveys some sense of how Science Fiction is perceived by many through out the world. From a historical point of view Science Fiction was the product of the times – a confluence of the industrial revolution and the socio-economic upheavals of the 19th century. While it was almost always focused on the future, Science Fiction was exploring the present through the lens of the future. These themes are especially relevant to the Muslim world as it makes it transition to modernity.

Most Islamic cultures and languages traditionally associated with Islam have a rich history of fantasy epics – One Thousand and One Nights in Arabic, Shahnama in Farsi, and Dastan-Amir-Hamza in Urdu especially come to mind. However Science Fiction as a popular genre of fiction is not yet a phenomenon in the Muslim world despite the fact that the fans of Science Fiction amongst the

younger generation of Muslims may be as widespread in the Muslim world as anywhere in the West. Indigenously produced Science Fiction, although not a rarity, is still less common.

Western Muslims and non-Muslims who are interested in Islamic themes, have emerged as a distinct demographic in recent years. Consequently the number of Muslims depicted in Science Fiction has greatly increased in the last years and thus the need for the current anthology.

Outside the world of fiction, the Muslim world offers an interesting glimpse of the transformative power of science and technology. Thus Dubai looks like a city straight out of a classic science fiction story. Even the conservative interpretations of Islamic law are relatively open-minded towards many opportunities offered by bio-technology and genetic engineering. The current volume, which is also the first anthology on the topic of Islam and Science Fiction explores a whole range of topics related to Islam, paints Muslims in a different light and puts them in contexts which many people in the do not usually associated with Muslims. It is thus the hope of the editors that the current volume would be an important contribution to the expanding sub-genre of exploring Islamic or Muslim related themes in Science Fiction.

August 1, 2008

A Brief Note on the Contents

Ahmed A. Khan

When the final assembling of the anthology came about, the editors divided some tasks among ourselves. Muhammad Aurangzeb Ahmad would write the introduction, putting the stories into perspective and I would take care of the author bios and brief notes preceding each story.

This happens to be the third anthology I have edited in the last two years (the other two being “Fall and Rise” and “SF Waxes Philosophical”) but this anthology differs from the other two in several respects. First, this is the first anthology where I am partnering with another editor. Second, this is the first anthology where we are paying the writers an honorarium in addition to providing contributor’s copy. Third, size-wise, this is the biggest anthology of the three. Fourth, content-wise, this has more original content (as opposed to reprints) ratio than the other two anthologies.

The first two stories are the only ones that are out and out reprints. The next four stories, starting with “Organic Geometry” and ending with “Servent of Iblis” are reprints with revisions new to this anthology. All the rest of the stories are appearing in print for the first time here.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the writers for the excellent stories and to Lee Kuruganti for the exciting cover art.

I have received moral support and encouragement from several of my writer friends – even those who are not included in this anthology – and I would like to thank them all: Ted Kosmatka, Paul Carlson, Berry, Marian Powell, to name a few.

I would also like to thank the readers for buying this book and would love to receive feedback.

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A WALK THROUGH THE GARDEN

Lucius Shepard

What can one say about Lucius Shepard that has not already been said? He is one of the most original writers of modern SF and has been writing since 1981. His works have graced almost all the leading SF magazines and many non-genre magazines as well. He has won the John W. Campbell, Nebula, Hugo and the Rhysling awards. His stories are stylish and thought-provoking, and none more so than the present story.

When the idea for this anthology started taking form in the minds of the editors, the first story I thought of was this one (originally published in Sci-Fiction, August 2003) and Lucius graciously let me have it. So here it is – a very strong start to the anthology.

Paradise awaits.

It begins at the foot of a mountain, a slice of which has been carved away by bombardment to expose a field of yellow flowers beneath—it looks as if the entire base is hollow, an immense cave utilized for this pretty purpose.

Unreal. Like a puddle of yellow blood spilled from the side of a wounded rock, spread out over a patch of dead ground. To Wilson, who hails from Colorado, where the mountains have snow on their slopes, this mountain is just a big ugly hill. He's not sure, either, that he would classify the field of flowers as the gateway to Paradise. There seems to be a division of opinion as to what the field is. The bomb they used to open up the cave was something new. Nobody is clear about what happened. According to Wilson's buddy, Baxter Tisdale, a corporal who's friends with some of the tech specialists, the brainiacs are talking about paradigm shifts, changes on the quantum level. When Wilson asked what the fuck was all that, Baxter told him to do some IQ, he wasn't going to attempt an explanation that Wilson, his intellect unamplified, couldn't possibly comprehend. Wilson was tempted to do as Baxter said. He likes IQ, likes the rush of getting suddenly smart, the way the world fits around him differently.

But he doesn't want to be too smart to do his job. In the morning they'll walk through the field of flowers and into the shadowy places beyond. Chances are he'll do IQ at some point before the mission, but right now he doesn't want to be thinking about that walk too deeply.

Wilson is sitting cross-legged atop a boulder on the outskirts of a mountain village in northern Iraq, gazing west over a barren valley, a position directly across from the field of flowers. He's shirtless, wearing desert-camo fatigue pants and a helmet, the optics of its faceplate magnified, so it seems he's looking at the flowers from a distance of fifty feet and not, as is truly the case, more than a mile. Wilson loves his helmet forever and happily ever after. It looks dangerous-robot slick with the tiger stripes he painted on the sides. It has a TV mounted above the visor so he can watch his favorite shows. It feeds him, dopes him, keeps him cool, plays his tunes, tells him when to fire, where to hide. An hour before, it reminded him to record messages for family and friends. He sent love to his parents, talked dirty to his girlfriend, Laura Witherspoon, and to his best friend back in Greeley, he said, "Yo, Mackie! I am the magic! My boots store energy—I can jump twenty-five feet straight fucking up, dude! Tomorrow we're gonna kick some brutal ass! Talk to ya later!" Now he's in a more reflective mood.

The thought of invading Paradise is fresh, but he's not too sure, you know.

Intel is promoting the idea that the flowers are a terrorist hydroponics experiment. That sounds bullshit to Wilson. There's little doubt the ragheads believe it's Paradise. If the village wasn't cordoned off, the entire population would go running into the darkness under the mountain, even though the ones that did so before the Americans arrived never reappeared.

Here and there among the flowers lie chunks of rock, some big as troop carriers. Wilson tells his helmet to go tight on one of the blossoms next to the big rock. It's long and fluted like a lily, its interior petals convulsed like those of a rose. He's never seen a flower resembling it. Not that he's an expert. The weird thing is, there are no bugs. He scans from blossom to blossom. Nary an ant, an aphid, or a bee. Maybe Intel isn't bullshitting, maybe the ragheads have developed a strain of flowers that don't need bugs to fertilize them. Maybe they're like a cool new drug source. Better than opium poppies. Wilson indulges a brief fantasy. He's back in Greeley, at a party, in a room with Mackie and a couple of girls, and they're about to twist one up when he produces a baggie filled with dried yellow

petals and says, “Magic time.” A few minutes later he and Laura Witherspoon are screwing on the ceiling, the walls have turned to greenish blue music, the carpet is the surface of a shaggy planet far below. He wishes for things he can’t have.

That Laura was with him, that he never re-upped. Most of all he wishes that he never volunteered for Special Ops. Depressed, he instructs his helmet to feed him a trippy level of downs via ocular mist. A minute drools off the lip of time. His head feels full of syrup, a warm sludge of thought. He’s got Chinese eyes, he’s nodding like the yellow flowers in the breeze ... They’re so close it looks as if he could reach out and snap off a blossom, lift it to his lips and drink secret nectar from the Garden of Allah.

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2018 hours

Sunsets from the perspective of the ledge are made beautiful by dust storms raging to the south. Immense swirls of crimson and gold figure the sky, transforming it into a swirling battle flag. Wilson watches the flowers redden, go purple at dusk, and finally vanish in darkness. He removes his helmet, picks up his sidearm, and strolls through the village. Narrow rocky streets; whitewashed houses lit by oil lamps; a diminutive mosque with a blue-and-white tiled dome. At the far end of the village, on a rocky shelf from which a path winds downhill toward the American compound, three teenage Iraqi boys are preparing to burn a cartoon of George Bush painted nearly life-sized on a sheet of cardboard and suspended from a limb of a leafless tree. Bush has been portrayed with the body of a capering monkey.

His head is a grinning pasted-on magazine photograph. The boys are dressed in jeans and T-shirts. They’re smoking cigarettes, joking around, not apparently motivated by political passion as much as by a desire to do mischief. One adds twigs to a small fire beneath the cardboard sheet. A lanky black man carrying a helmet like Wilson’s under one arm is standing off to the side, looking on.

“Hey, Baxman!” Wilson exchanges a complex handshake with his friend.
“S’up?”

“Checkin’ out the rebels here.” Baxter’s face, highlighted by the flames, is a polished mask. His eyes are pointed with flickery red cores.

“We oughta clue these guys in there’s a new president,” says Wilson, and Baxter says, “They know that. They not goin’ forget ol’ George until he’s way longer gone than he is now. Man’s the embodiment of the Great Satan for these fuckers.”

Wilson notes his use of the word “embodiment” and wonders if Baxter’s working behind IQ. Hard to tell, because Baxter’s a pretty sharp guy even natural.

“Burn his monkey ass!” Baxter makes a two-handed gesture, emulating leaping flames. The boys look perplexed and fearful. “Go on! I’m not goin’

hurt you! Burn his ass!”

“Whatcha got against Bush?”

“What do you got for him? Dude was an embarrassment!”

“He chased Saddam outa town, man.”

Baxter gives him a pitying look. “Where you think Saddam’s at? He’s not dead, man. Some guys’re sayin’ the flowers might be the front of his secret hideout. I think that’s crap. Man probably had some surgery, turned himself into a woman and is right now fuckin’ his brains out on a beach in Brazil. My point bein’, all Bush did was give Saddam a goddamn golden parachute!”

Wilson knows Baxter’s just acting pissed-off at him; he’s driving away the demons of tomorrow morning the best he knows how. “So the flowers aren’t his secret palace or something, fuck are they?”

Baxter pulls a sheaf of print-outs from his back pocket. The heading on the front page is Paradise and Hell: In the Light of the Holy Qur’an. It’s part of the library relating to Islamic culture and religion they were forced while on board the transport that brought them to Iraq. Wilson’s retention of the material was deemed substandard. “I’m down with the ragheads on this one,” Baxter says.

“You think it’s Paradise, huh?” Wilson examines the print-outs. “It say anything in there ‘bout yellow flowers?”

“Naw, but you haven’t been hearin’ what I’m hearin’. The way the brainiacs are

talkin' about the bomb, how it maybe broke us through to some other plane. They say the whole area's unstable, but when I ask 'em, 'Unstable how?', they clam up on me." Baxter slaps the sheaf against his palm. "Paradise sounds reasonable as anything else. That's why I'm readin'

up on it."

Wilson's attention has wandered, and seeing that Baxter is waiting for a response, he feels as he often did when called on in class back in high school. Unprepared, and yet compelled to say something. "We're not fighting Saddam," he says. "We're fighting terror."

"Say what?"

"We're fighting terror. Saddam's not the target, man."

Baxter shakes his head ruefully. "Man, you a mess!"

The bottom of the cardboard sheet catches fire. The flames wash upward, devouring Monkey George. The teenage boys let out halfhearted whoops and glare fiercely at the Americans; then they, too, lapse into silence and watch the cardboard shriveling to ash.

As they walk together down the path, using their helmets in night-vision mode to find their way, the lights of the compound greenly visible below, illuminating tents and ranks of armored vehicles, Baxter says, "Ragheads got some weird ideas 'bout hell."

Baxter's voice is muffled by the helmet. Wilson asks him to repeat and then says, "Yeah? Like what kind?"

"They say most people in hell goin' be women. Hey, call it whatever you want. Hell. Heaven. I don't care. You can put me down in with the ladies anytime!"

"What else they say?"

"The usual shit. You drink melted brass, you get burned all over. They work your ass to death, but you never die. One weird thing: they let people out."

"Outa hell?"

“Yeah. People in heaven intercede for people in hell and then they let ‘em out. Book makes a big deal ‘bout the last man gets into heaven. He has to crawl out from hell and then he sees a shade tree and after he goes through some other bullshit, he’s honored by Allah.” Baxter negotiates a tricky stretch of path banked downward from the hill over a hundred-foot drop. “‘Course once he’s in heaven, he learns he’s the lowest status guy.”

“Probably still be happy,” Wilson says. “Probably still beats hell.”

“Sooner later he’s goin’ think about movin’ on up the ladder. It’s human fuckin’ nature.”

They stop for a smoke, sitting on a boulder barely twenty feet above the operations tent. The sky is starless, the air thick with heat. Faint shouts and rumblings rise to them. Baxter spits down onto the tent and says, “This shit here, man, it’s not what I signed on for. I got half a mind to go for a long walk east before tomorrow.”

“I’m not listening to this crap!” Wilson says, and when Baxter starts to come back with more of the same, he talks through him. “Uh-uh, man. I don’t wanna even take this to the level of a fucking discussion. You understand?”

Baxter hits his cigarette; the brightened coal paints his face in orange glow and shadow, making him look both dangerous and defeated.

“We’re gonna kick terrorist ass tomorrow,” Wilson says.

“Mmmph.”

“Our daddy was a stick of dynamite and mama was T-Rex on the rag.”

Baxter flips his cigarette out over the tent and tracks its sparking downward arc. “I’m not playin’ that game with you. I’m not into it.”

“How do you spell Democracy?”

“You heard what I said. I’m not doin’ this with you.”

“I want to know. How do you spell it?”

“Fuck you.”

“I am a truly ignorant son-of-a-bitch! I have a deep-seated soul-need to know how to spell Democracy.” Wilson holds out his right hand to Baxter, palm up. “I need it from you, Baxman. We going hunting together in the morning. I need to get motivated.”

Baxter says, “Shit,” and laughs, like whatever, okay, I’ll play your dumbass game, but when he slaps Wilson’s palm, he does so with gung-ho force. Their hands lock strong in a gladiator grip.

“How do you spell Democracy?” Wilson asks, and Baxter, all serious now, warrior-mean and going eye-to-eye, says, “With bullets, man. With bullets.”

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Friday, 0525

Packed into a troop carrier with Baxter and six other soldiers dressed in camo spacesuits, Wilson listens to tunes until his helmet asks him to review his medal file. Using the computer built into the left arm of his suit, he pulls it up on-screen. The file consists of biographical data, likes and dislikes, personal observations, quotes, information that will be provided the media should he perform a brilliant act of bravery and initiative, especially if he should die in its performance, in which case a gorgeous news slut will announce his name on television, breathe sadly and then pick a choice bit from the file to give color to his life, informing her public that Spec 4

Charles Newfield Wilson taught his kid sister to play hoops and had a taste for orange soda. The last item in the file is entitled 10 Things Specialist Fourth Class Charles N. Wilson Wants You To Know. Wilson can’t recall the last time he modified the list, but some of it seems incoherent. It’s clear he was in a different head at the time, riding a mighty chemical wave, or— and this is more likely—the list is a product of several variant chemical states. He sits with a finger poised over the delete key, but thinks maybe he knew more when he modified the list than he does now and closes the file unchanged.

The things he’s learned from Baxter and others about the bomb and the field of flowers, what happened and why, drift through his thoughts.

Probably none of it's true. They float these rumors in lieu of actual explanation, let the men and media sort and combine them into a consensus lie. But there are no media this far north in Iraq, he tells himself. So maybe it's all true, maybe all the scraps of loose talk are pieces of a truth that he isn't smart enough to fit together. He wonders what the villagers said when asked why they thought the field of flowers was the entrance to Paradise. He wonders why the answers they gave their interrogators have been classified.

Like maybe the villagers knew something command doesn't want the rest of them to hear. It's better not to consider these things, better to shoot some battle juice and get drooly and red-eyed. Nonetheless, he considers them.

The things he does know, the thing's he's heard. Fitting them together— that's Today's New Army Challenge. He switches off his tunes, switches on the intrasuit channel and hears Baxter say, "... they live in hollowed-out pearls. Each man gets two gardens of gold and two gardens of silver."

"I ain't hearin' nothin' 'bout what the women s'posed to get," says Janet Perdue. "Though I guess I can figger it out." She laughs, and the other woman in the patrol, Gay Roban, GRob, joins in.

The carrier stops, and the lights go red. Wilson knows they're at the edge of the field. Time to juice up, buckle down, jack your rifle into your computer, make everything secure. Baxter drones on, now talking the varieties of demons and angels and how people are brought out of hell burned all over, except on their faces, and are laid down on the banks of a river to recuperate. How on the day of judgment, hell will be hauled up from beneath the earth by seventy thousand ropes. Wilson punches up a drug mix on the computer, treating himself to a dry martini of God'n Country, with just a whisper of IQ. The syringe bites his forearm. Within seconds he's gripped by a pathologically smooth feeling of competency and confidence, underscored by a stream of outrage and devotion to duty. The claustrophobic enclosure of the carrier seems like a seed pod that will soon burst open and expel them, deploying them so as to sow Democracy in its new ground. Though muted by suits and helmets, the ferocity of his comrades-in-arms radiates out around him. Their expressions, partially shielded by red reflection, are uniformly grim. Except for DeNovo, who's turned on his privacy screen. Instead of eyes and nose and mouth, his faceplate displays a video capture from a home movie, some kids—one of them probably DeNovo himself—playing in somebody's back yard, splashing in a plastic pool. Wilson's privacy

screen is programmed to show shots of the Rockies, but he's been thinking about making a change.

The voice of Colonel Reese sounds over the intrasuit channel. Wilson has never met the colonel, never even laid eyes on him. He suspects that Reese does not exist, that he is a computer program, but he hearkens to the words, he lets their design control him. He pictures Reese to be a towering martial figure and not a doughy chaplain type. Standing at crisp parade rest, engaging them sternly yet with loving familiarity.

"The idea for which you are fighting is too large to hold in the mind,"

says the colonel. "If it was visible, it would be too large to see. Like the breadth of the sky or the shape of the universe. Here in this place of terror and iniquity, you are the sole expression of that idea. You represent its burning edges, you carry its flame, you are the bearers of its purifying light.

You are the most dangerous men and women in the world. You kill so others may not need to kill, and there is no one better at it. If you die, you will in some form continue, because what lives in you and through you will not die. Even your death will serve to light the way."

The colonel talks about home, God, the country in whose national interest this beautifully tailored, corporate-sponsored message of warrior religion has been created, invoked to inspire in them a zealousness comparable to that of the Enemy. He mentions each soldier by name and refers to elements of their private lives, to specific moments and people and places. The words seem like a prayer to Wilson, and he closes his eyes.

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0637 hours

There are three patrols, teams of eight each, with two more such patrol groups scheduled to follow. Seventy-two soldiers in all. Now and then Wilson checks his helmet screen, which shows a digital animation of their progress, little brown figures knee-deep in yellow flowers. He can control the screen to give him whatever angle he wants, even close-ups of the helmets that reveal the expression any soldier is wearing at a particular moment, stamped on features that are individualized but rendered like cartoon superheroes. Sometimes he

commands the screen to give him a low angle looking upward at one soldier or another, a cool point of view that makes them appear to be giants moving beneath a blank grayish blue sky.

He's looking at Baxter that way when a toylike helicopter appears in the digital sky above Baxter's image. Flashing red words materialize on the screen, ordering them to proceed more rapidly, the patrols at their rear are ready to deploy.

The mouth of the cave excavated by the bomb is four hundred sixty-seven feet wide, but its depth reads infinite on Wilson's instruments. Even more distressing, the cave appears to occupy the entire base of the mountain—an unimaginable tonnage is essentially hovering, supported to a height ranging from forty-one to seventy-seven feet by only thin rock walls.

Thinking his helmet must be whack, Wilson checks with the others.

Everyone's readings are the same. The red words keep on flashing, telling them to advance. Baxter, who leads the patrol, asks for a confirmation from command and receives a go. The thought that he's about to be crushed does not unnerve Wilson. Death will be quick, his drugs are good, and Colonel Reese's words were a knife that spread his fear so thin, it has melted away into him like hot butter into a biscuit. He moves forward, swinging his rifle in an easy arc to cover his area. As he passes beneath a toothy hang of rock at the entrance to the cave, he switches to a private channel and signals Baxter.

“Yo, dog!” Wilson says. “Got any more good advice on the afterlife?”

Baxter doesn't respond for a couple of beats, then says, “Yeah. Get ready.”

“Fucking command knew this all along, man. They knew this was whack.”

“You think?” says Baxter, affecting a retard voice. “Do some IQ, man.

Your dumbass is showin'.”

“This here's no time to be peaking,” Wilson says. “This here's look-straight-ahead time. Keep-your-mind-on-the-map time.”

“IQ's good any ol' time. You been usin' too drifty a mix, man. You got to burn

that shit home. Straight no chaser.”

They walk without speaking for a few seconds.

“All right. I’m shuttin’ it down,” Baxter says.

“Hey, Baxter!”

“Yeah?”

Wilson wants to say something to fortify their bond, to acknowledge it, because in the midst of his lion glow, his sense of supernatural direction, there’s an unfortified part of him that needs a human affirmation; but he can’t bring the words out. Finally he says, “We cool, man?”

“Nothin’ but, man. You know that. Nothin’ but.”

“Okay ... cool.”

They trudge onward, crushing the yellow blossoms underfoot, and then Baxter says, “One thing that book tells about Paradise? Said you enter Paradise in the most beautiful and perfect of forms ... in the form of Adam.”

“Adam-and-Eve Adam?”

“Yeah, you enter Paradise, you be just like him. You be tall as a palm tree. Sixty cubits tall.”

“Fucking Paradise must be a seriously fucking big joint,” Wilson says, and Baxter says, “Can’t get any bigger’n this cave, can it? ‘Least that’s what I’m readin’.”

They remain joined in silence.

“All right, man,” says Baxter. “Shuttin’ it down.”

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0742 hours

There’s no apparent end to the flowers, and the deeper they walk into the cave,

the light stays the same, sourceless, as if they're moving within a bubble of pale dawn radiance, carrying it forward with them. Wilson thinks that if the cave is truly Paradise, then all of Paradise must be this light and these flowers. They can no longer see the cave walls, only the rocky ceiling.

At last his digital screen registers something round and white at the edge of the display. It's massive, a white globe measuring more than two hundred feet in diameter. Yet as they draw near this surreal-looking object, he realizes that while it's big enough to crawl inside and walk around in—there's an open door for that very purpose—it can't be anywhere near as big as his instruments say. Its skin is lustrous and gleaming, like that of a pearl.

Instead of being set at ground level, the door is maybe eighteen, twenty feet overhead, occupying an area on the pearl's upper curve. A track of crushed yellow flowers leads away from it, making it appear that the thing was tossed from a careless hand and rolled to a stop. Smears of bright blood streak the inside of the door.

A babble surges over the intrasuit channel. Baxter orders everyone except Wilson to shut up, fan out, and keep watch. Wilson punches up a shot of IQ, straight no chaser. It's time to be wise. He stares awestruck at the 12

pearl while Baxter contacts command and, as the shot takes effect, he thinks that the pearl might well be two hundred feet in diameter. If they have, in fact, entered Paradise, then their bodies, according to the Qur'an, are twenty cubits tall, and this would place the pearl's size in a different perspective.

That's bullshit, of course, but this is a bullshit mission. Bullshit might prove the key to survival.

"I can't raise 'em," Baxter says privately to Wilson. "Command channel's dead."

Wilson waits for an order.

"Go take a look up there." Baxter points to the door. "Stay private when you report."

Wilson checks the energy storage units in his magic boots. He crouches, leaps high, catches the edge of the door and swings himself over so he's braced, perched on the doorsill, looking down into the pearl. What he sees is opulence.

Draperies of peach and turquoise silk, and tapestries on the walls; dishes of silver and gold; silken couches and pillows; ornate rugs, inlaid tables and chairs. Everything torn, scattered, broken, as after a violent home invasion. An archway leads to another opulently appointed room. The oddest thing, the floor—according to the placement of the door—should be canted out of true, the furniture all slid down to one end; but though toppled and knocked around, the furniture hasn't obeyed the laws of gravity, and if Wilson were to drop down, he would not be standing at a lean. It disorients him to see this.

He reports to Baxter, and Baxter says, "I'm coming up."

Baxter launches himself, grabs the door. Wilson holds out a gauntleted hand, helps him swing over. They crouch together in the doorway, awkwardly balanced, clinging to one another.

"Looks clear," Baxter says after scoping things out. "Maybe this is the way."

"The way? The way to fucking what?" says Wilson. "That's not the protocol, man. We're to reconnoiter the cave and report on what we find."

"We're not supposed to go climbing inside the shit we find."

"That's not how I understand the orders."

Baxter's indifference, his clipped GI tone, it pisses Wilson off. "I fucking respectfully disagree. I think the goddamn corporal's got his head up his ass."

"Check your display, man. See what the cave's readin'."

The cave reads infinite in all directions except up.

"Command channel is dead," says Baxter. "There's no direction out. We can wander around in these fuckin' flowers til we stink out our suits or we can explore this apparent goddamn habitation. I'm sayin' that's the way we go."

"I understand the corporal's logic. I admit it makes a certain degree of sense. However ..."

"Cut the shit, man!"

“... I suggest it may not be the wisest course to jump down the first fucking rabbit hole we come to.”

DeNovo signals on the intrasuit channel and Baxter tells him to report.

“You gotta see this!” DeNova says excitedly. “There’s a big drop-off.

Down in it’s like a forest. Trees ... all gold. Trunks and leaves, they’re all gold!”

Wilson spots DeNovo in the distance, a tiny brown figure.

“Hell you doin’ way out there? Get your ass back now!” says Baxter.

“It’s amazing, Baxman!” says DeNovo. “Fucking beautiful!”

Wilson locates the digital DeNovo on his helmet screen and goes close-up on him. His expression is one of maxed-out glee, a delirious Italian cartoon hero. Wilson shifts to an overhead view, sees the drop-off, the ranks of digitally realized yellow trees and bushes. He shifts back to a close-up on DeNovo. Baxter is yelling, ordering DeNovo to return, when something dark sweeps across the screen and he’s gone. Wilson glances toward the spot where he last saw DeNovo. Only yellow flowers. Alarmed voices chatter on the intrasuit channel. Baxter shouts them down, orders everyone back to the pearl.

“You see what it was?” he asks Wilson.

“I was watching my screen, man. It was just a blur.”

Baxter nods toward the room below. “Jump on down in there.”

“Baxman, I don’t ...”

“We got nowhere else to go. I need the door clear. Go.”

Wilson jumps, makes a cushioned landing on his magic boots, dropping to a squat. He comes up, rifle ready, reading for life signs. “Still clear,” he says to Baxter.

“Stay there!” Baxter continues urging the rest of the patrol to hurry and then he goes, “Aw, shit!”, and screams at them. Wilson hears bursts of small arms fire

and the concussion of grenades. He checks his screen. Wolves, he thinks when he sees the figures that are closing in on the pearl. But they're not true wolves, they've got human feet and hands ... except the fingers have talons. They're knuckle-draggers, their arms incredibly long, covered in reddish brown hair, the same color as the mountain. They're long-jawed, too. Red-eyed. Their limbs are spindly and strings of drool sway from their chins as they move through the flowers, harrowing the much smaller figures who're racing toward the pearl. Even hunched over, their heads scrape the ceiling, so they must be forty, fifty feet tall — if he's to believe his instruments. But how can he believe, how can he accept these digital monstrosities as truth? He calls out to Baxter, asks what he's seeing, but Baxter's too busy shouting orders to respond. Wilson focuses on the helmet screen. Watches as the shambling gait of one werewolf carries it close to a running soldier. Janet Perdue. It snatches her up in a taloned hand and bites her in half like she was a candy bar with wriggling legs. Blood splatters as in Japanese anime. Shocked, incapable of belief, Wilson hits replay and watches it happen again.

A soldier appears framed in the doorway above and jumps down beside him. Gay Roban, looking terrified behind her faceplate. She unlatches her helmet and removes it, rips off the skullcap that's covered her close-cropped blond hair. She stares with dazed fixity at Wilson, then casts her eyes over the disarray of the room.

"Is it wolves up there, GRob?" Wilson asks, catching her arm. "Like werewolves?"

She pushes him away and says dully, "Fucking monsters."

Baxter jumps down, closing the door behind him as he drops, and GRob screeches at him. "Chickenshit asshole! You can't just leave 'em!"

"Check your screen." he says, and when she won't calm down, he shouts, "They're gone, goddamn it! Check it out!"

Acting stunned, GRob puts her helmet back on. Wilson goes wide-angle on his screen. Werewolves prowling about, bending to sniff at the flowers, then hurrying with a gimpy, hunchbacked gait to another spot and sniffing again. No soldiers are visible, but the fact that the werewolves are hunting for survivors causes Wilson to think some may be alive, their suits shut down, maybe

burrowed under the dirt. Three patrol groups. Seventy-two soldiers. They can't be the only ones who made it. It was all so fast.

GRob lifts off her helmet. "Jesus!"

"Wrong fuckin' prophet," Baxter says flatly.

"Could be still some of our people out there," Wilson says. "They could be shut down, they ..."

"Could be?" Baxter spits out a laugh. "We ain't goin' back out there for 'could be.' Put that from your mind."

"We can't stay here." GRob slaps at the wall. "Something picked this goddamn thing up and threw it. You seen the track it left. Like, y'know?"

They fucking threw it! You wanna be here the son of a bitch comes back?"

"We're not stickin' around," says Baxter.

"We're not going outside, we're not sticking around ..." GRob gets in his face. "You gonna make us disappear, Baxman? You got that much mojo?"

Baxter steps away from confrontation and aims a forefinger at her.

"You best slow it down, woman!"

Her cheeks flushed, GRob drills him with a furious stare, and even in the midst of fear and freakery, Wilson feels the pull of an old attraction, this long-standing thing he's had for her. He wonders how he can think of sex, even fleetingly, even with GRob, who's muscled up but looks like a woman, not a steroid queen like Perdue. Escape, he imagines. His hormones offering him an out. He still can't accept that Perdue is dead. She was a mad fucking soldier.

"Punch yourself some downs," Baxter says to GRob. "Light level."

GRob doesn't move to obey.

"That's an order!" He looks to Wilson. "You, too."

"That's not cool, man! We can't be doing downs we're in the shit!"

“Hear what I said? That’s an order!”

“I already did up. When the wolves showed,” Wilson says, not wanting to dull his edge. “I went way light, but I did up.”

Baxter eyes him with suspicion, then says wearily, “They’re shaitans, not wolves. I told you about ‘em in the carrier.”

“I wasn’t all the time listening.”

“Muslim hell got some devils resemble wolves. That’s what we saw.”

“I thought this was supposed to be Paradise,” Wilson says, and Baxter says, “Who the fuck knows? Maybe the ragheads back in the village weren’t tellin’ it straight. Maybe they’re chumpin’ our ass. Wouldn’t be the first time.”

GRob, keying up a drug mix, makes a disparaging noise. “We just gonna sit around and get high until the shit comes down? That the plan?”

Baxter checks the mix on her computer, tells her to do up, and then says to Wilson, “Read the pearl for her.”

The interior of the pearl consists of chamber after chamber, what seems an infinite progression of rooms of varying proportions. Wilson reports this and Baxter says, “You got that, GRob? Infinite. There’s this room, then another and another and another ... Get the picture?”

GRob’s leisurely tone reflects her new chemical constituency. “Naw, man. I don’t got it. How’s that possible?”

“Right! I’m goin’ explain this whole thing.”

She doesn’t seem to notice the sarcasm in Baxter’s voice and waits for him to deliver an explanation. Finally it appears to sink in. Her head droops to the side as if with the weight of acceptance that no explanation will be forthcoming. A smile touches the corners of her lips, the strain empties from her face. She might be seventeen, a sleepy girl waking after being with her lover, remembering the night they had. “This is probably the way to go,” she says.

It’s a vague statement, but Wilson, recognizing the hopelessness of their

situation, trapped inside a giant pearl that has no end, devils like werewolves roaming everywhere, without the guidance of command, and maybe sixty-nine dead, death by cartoon, he understands precisely what she means.

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1200 hours

They pass through room after room, more than a hundred by Wilson's count, all essentially the same. Luxuriously appointed and in disarray, the only sign of previous habitation being the smears of blood on the door through which they entered the pearl. Shortly before noon they open a door and find that it leads out of the pearl, which is lying not in a field of flowers, but in the midst of a brass forest. Perhaps the same forest DeNovo mistook for gold, though Wilson's not clear on how the pearl ended up in the middle of it.

Stunted-looking trees and undergrowth, every vein of leaf and fork of stem and twist of root wrought in cunning detail, rising to the roof of the cave.

The temperature of the forest is near scalding, Steam rises from the brass foliage. The vegetation is too dense and interwoven to afford an easy passage. Baxter orders them back into the pearl and calls for a break. Says he's shutting down for an hour. He tells Wilson to close the door leading to the forest and to stand watch while they sleep. Wilson doesn't believe this is a good time to rest, but he's tired and raises no objection. At the center of the room they're in is a fountain, its basin covered in a mosaic of white and turquoise tiles. Liking the trickling sound of the water, Wilson sits on the lip, his rifle across his knees. GRob removes her helmet and lies down among some pillows. Baxter sits against the opposite wall, his legs stretched out.

Wilson's grateful for time alone. He needs to think and to augment thought he orders up another shot of IQ. He considers adding a jolt of God'n Country, but decides that the interests of the United States of America may well pose a conflict with the interests of his own survival, that—indeed— they have always done so and he has, until now, allowed them preeminence.

He's done his duty, and he's way past the regulation limit for IQ—his heart doesn't need any more stress. The drug puts up blinders around his brain, prevents thoughts of home and comfort from seeping in, and he concentrates on the matter at hand. Where are they? What did this? That's the basic question. If

he can understand what happened, maybe he can work out where they are. He references a scientific encyclopedia on his helmet screen, reads articles on quantum physics, not getting all of it, but enough to have a handle on what “changes on the quantum level” signifies. If the bomb caused such changes ... well, a bomb being an entirely unsubtle weapon, the changes it produced would not be discrete ones. A chaotic effect would be the most likely result. He looks up the word “chaos” and finds this definition:

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“A state of things in which chance is supreme; especially: the confused unorganized state of primordial matter before the creation of distinct forms.”

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The place they’re in, the cave, Paradise, whatever, could not, Wilson thinks, be described as disorganized, though the supremacy of chance may be a factor. What are the chances that they have not encountered anything in the cave other than things he’s heard about from either the villagers or Baxter?

Distinct form has obviously been imposed on a chaotic circumstance. There must be some anthropomorphic element involved. What you get is what you see or, better said, what you expect to see. Since the villagers were the first witnesses, and since they’ve been expecting to see Paradise all their lives, when something inexplicable happened they imposed the form of the Garden of Allah, the metaphorical forms of the Qur’an, on primordial matter and then spread the news so that anyone who came afterward would have this possibility in mind and thus be capable of expecting the same things.

The devils? Maybe half the village expected not Paradise, but hell—thus the two were jammed together in an unholy synthesis. Or maybe, like Baxter suggested, the villagers were holding back some vital details. This explanation satisfies Wilson. He feels he might poke a few holes in it if he did more IQ, but he’s confident the truth is something close to what he’s envisioned. The idea that there may be a congruent truth does not escape him. It’s conceivable the day of judgment, the day when hell is hauled up from beneath the earth, is at hand and that the bomb was the inciting event.

None of this, however, helps him as he hoped it might. Knowing where he is has clarified the problem, but not the solution.

GRob stirs, stands, and comes to join him on the lip of the fountain. She unlatches her gauntlets and dips her bare hands into the water and splashes her face.

“Go on take a bath if you want,” Wilson says, grinning. “I’ll keep an eye out.”

She shoots him a diffident look. “Uh-huh.”

“Hey, I’ve seen your ass before.”

“That was training. You see it now, you might take it for license.”

The clear modulation of her voice and her use of the term “license”

alert him. “You’re not on downs,” he says.

“I boosted IQ when I racked out. I wanted to work through this mess.”

“Yeah, same here.”

“You hit on anything?”

Wilson tells her his theory in brief and then asks what she came up with.

“We’re close,” she says, patting her face with damp hands. “But I don’t think this place has anything to with Paradise. I think it’s all hell.”

“How you figure?”

“Only things we’ve seen so far are flowers, the wolves, and a pearl with some blood on the door and nobody inside. Now maybe the pearl came from Paradise, but whatever dropped it, dropped it in hell. We find a door that leads out of it, it leads to the brass trees with the boiling fucking air.” With a flourish, she wipes her left hand dry on her thigh. “Hell.”

“Might be other doors.”

“Probably thousands, but I don’t get they’re gonna lead us anywhere good.”

GRob cups her right hand, scoops up water and lets it dribble down her throat onto her chest. “Maybe you can reach Paradise from here, but I figure we might hafta pass through somewhere bad to get there. And even if we find it, what the

fuck we supposed to do then? We're infidels, man. We're unbelievers."

"You may be taking this all too literally."

"Taking it metaphorically just makes you confused." It seems she's about to say more, but she falls silent, and Wilson says, "What?"

"Nothing."

"Don't hold back now. You got something, let's hear it."

"Okay." GRob dries her right hand. "Maybe it's BS, but back in Tel Aviv I was doing a tech lieutenant. Guy's always trying to impress me what a huge deal he was. Mr. I've-Got-A-Secret. He told me they were fixing up something special for Al Qaeda. A bomb. Didn't know what kind, but he was working on the triggering device. Part of it was this big fucking electric battery produced seventy thousand volts. So when I saw him at the compound ..."

"Fuck!" says Wilson.

"See what I'm saying? I saw him here, I remembered all that shit about hell and seventy thousand ropes. I said, Okay, maybe it's a coincidence.

Then when Baxman started running his mouth in the carrier, when he mentioned it, I was like, Aw, man! This is too weird, y'know."

Wilson studies the back of his left gauntlet, the grain of the plastic forearm shield, his thoughts looping between poles of denial and despair.

"Seventy thousand's such a weird number," GRob says. "I thought it was like a special number for ragheads, so I did a search. Only time it's mentioned is in relation to hell. Seventy thousand ropes. Seventy thousand volts. Some ol' raghead mystic back in the day, he got the word wrong ... or he received the message right and didn't know what volts were, so he said, 'ropes.'"

"Fuck," says Wilson again—there seems little else to say.

"No doubt." GRob hefts her rifle. "I say we blow a few holes in those brass trees. Clear a path. See what's on the other side."

“Might be a big goddamn forest,” Wilson says dubiously.

“Didn’t you read it? It’s not that big. And we got a lot of goddamn firepower. The other side of it read infinite, but ...” She shrugs. “What’s the option? We hang out here, live off battle juice and C rats? That sucks.”

“Baxter’ll come up with something.”

GRob snorts. “Forget him! Man’s sitting over there drooling into his food tube. I never heard anyone give an order like he gave us. Take downs in the middle of the shit? What’s that about?!”

“You were acting pretty crazy.”

“I saw a fifty-foot wolf smelled like a dumpster eat my best fucking friend! If I was outa line, Baxter shoulda slapped me down. No way he shoulda told me to get druggy.”

“He’ll bounce back.”

“Oh, yeah. He just needs a nap. That’s whack, man! He was right for command, we’d have stopped five, ten minutes, then kept on burning. He’s over! You’n me, we gotta look to each other from now on.”

Baxter’s helmeted face, half-obsured by reflection, seems at peace.

Asleep or on the nod, it’s no way to be in the midst of war. Wilson wants to ignore the idea that Baxter’s showing cracks, but he doesn’t dispute GRob’s last statement. “What’s Arizona like?” he asks.

“You live right next-door. Don’t you know?”

“I been to the ruins at Betatakin. That’s about it.”

“Got cheap package stores. Cheap smokes. The desert’ll trip you out. I don’t know. It’s cool.” She gazes off into a private distance. “Running the border towns was the best. We’d start out in Nogales and hit the cantinas all the way into New Mexico. Drinking and dancing.” She gives her head a little flip, and Wilson thinks the gesture must date back to the time when her hair was long and she’d toss it back from her face. He imagines her with a summer dress clinging

to her body, laughing, living crazy under the stars, and how they met and had a night beneath the stained ceiling of a twenty-dollar motel room and the next morning they drove off in opposite directions and forgot one another, but their bodies remembered ...

“Where’s your head at, man?” GRob asks. “Am I losing you, too?”

“Just a little vacation. I’m back.”

She gives him an even look and extends her hand for the grip.

They lock up, chest to chest, eye to eye, and she says, “We get outa this, man ... You’n me. For real.”

“Are you motivating me?”

“Fucking A! Is it working?”

“I’m thinking about it.”

“Think hard. Think a week in Rome. We’ll see how it sets up after that.”

“Naw, how about somewhere by the water? Tangiers.”

“You got it! Soon as we clear debriefing.”

Wilson searches for the place behind her eyes, the place every woman’s got where they keep their soul ray shuttered, and feels it from her. “We’re not getting out of this,” he says.

She holds steady. “It’s still a promise.”

They stay locked, and then she says, “Fuck the monsters! We’re the real monsters here.”

“Fanged motherfuckers!” Wilson says. “We rule the goddamn world!”

“We’re poison in a plastic pill. They eat us, they’ll crap blood and scream for their mamas.”

“They won’t eat us, we’ll eat them. We’ll burrow into their bodies and live there.

Raise our babies on their dead flesh.”

“We’re too cool to die! Too sexy!”

“We’re movie stars with mad fucking weapons!”

“We’re scrap iron ...”

“We’re wild dogs!

“... we were born for the shit!”

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1323 hours

On waking, Baxter exhibits a passive attitude. He doesn’t seem to care what they do. He’s obviously been running high levels of down. GRob draws Wilson aside and suggests they leave him, he’s likely to become a liability.

Wilson tells her he can’t do that yet. He tries talking to Baxter, says they’re thinking about trying the forest, and Baxter just goes, “Whatever.”

The three of them stand in front of the pearl, their rifles set to fire mini-grenades, and walking forward together they clear a path of smoldering brass wreckage. They walk, stop, fire, walk. Wilson plays his tunes to muffle the detonations. Globules of melted brass accumulate on the ground.

The trees on either side are blackened, their leaves shredded by shrapnel.

Shattered glowing twigs snatch at their suits. Acrid smoke mixes with the rising steam. Big brown rats scurry underfoot, some of them burning. There must be thousands. Their squeaking becomes a shrill tapestry of sound that comes like feedback to Wilson’s ears. Ten minutes in, Baxter calls for a halt and GRob says, “Fuck you, Jim!” and then, to Wilson, says, “Keep firing!”

Baxter hesitates, drops behind, but catches up after a few seconds. He fires, however, only intermittently and doesn’t react when urged to give an effort.

It takes almost an hour to carve a four-foot-wide path to within a dozen feet of

the forest's boundary. Through gaps in the gleaming foliage they see what appears to be a field of yellow flowers. The field reads infinite in all directions but one. On his helmet screen, Wilson begins to receive an inconstant digital image of the cave mouth, sections of it eroding into pixels.

He's excited at first, hopeful, but when he goes to a deeper view, the display shows werewolves prowling in the field beyond the cave. He asks Baxter to contact command, but Baxter's not functioning on a soldier level, so Wilson tries making contact himself. The command channel remains dead.

"Those fucking wolves are out there," GRob says. "They're dead for real, not just their transmitter's down. I say we keep on going."

"Deeper into the cave or out into the valley?" Wilson asks this of Baxter, but it's GRob who answers. "Deeper," she says. "Might be worse back in there, but I done enough with those wolves."

"It doesn't matter one way or the other," Baxter says, slurring his words.

The anger and frustration that's been building in Wilson, his sense of being abandoned by Baxter, betrayed by him, all this spikes, but he doesn't act on it, he doesn't start ranking on his best friend, and from this he realizes that, like GRob, he has given up on Baxter. Their stroll in the brass forest has confirmed her judgment. "Dog!" he says to Baxter. "You in there? You are, you better do something, man. Battle juice, God'n Country, IQ.

Whatever it takes. 'Cause you are fucking slipping away."

Baxter's eyes find him through the faceplate, and he's about to speak when a silent shadow sweeps over them, a massive shadow. Wilson knows before he glances up that it's death in some form, its chill invades him, but it's gone so quickly, the form that imprints itself on his mind doesn't seem the one he actually saw, a cat's face with black wings, leathery wings and struts of cartilage, maybe a bat, an enormous bat. Incredibly fast. Like the blur that took DeNovo. He looks back along the path. Rats have gathered and are gathering in the crooks of the twisted brass trees that survived their passage, thousands of glinting red eyes pointed from pockets of shadow. He hears behind him the snick of GRob slotting a fresh magazine into her rifle.

"Keep going," she says. "That's who we are, man. We keep going."

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1655 hours

They are miles from the brass forest, the walls of the cave once again too distant to see or to read, lost in a field of yellow flowers, when they happen upon what appears to be a survivor from another patrol, a suited figure sitting among the flowers, his torso and helmeted head visible above the blooms. At a distance he looks like an element of a Zen garden. A minimalist, vaguely human sculpture of pale brown stone. His privacy screen has been engaged and the display on his faceplate is showing a clip excerpted from a Sylvester and Tweety Bird cartoon. GRob bends to him, punches keys on the soldier's computer, reads the arm display. "OD," she says.

"Who is it?" Wilson asks.

"Gary Basknight."

Wilson remembers him from training. The Basilisk, he called himself.

Kept growing a soul patch against regs. Big, muscular kid from Tampa. A laughing skull tattooed on his neck. Wilson, himself tattooless, contemplated getting a similar one. He watches the cartoon clip. Sylvester chases Tweety Bird around a corner inside a house and screeches to a halt when he sees Tweety hovering before him. He makes a two-handed grab for the bird, but Tweety squirts up and Sylvester just misses. He makes another grab, and another. Another yet. Each time, Tweety Bird squirts higher, losing a yellow feather or two in the process, yet suffering no serious damage, continuing to hover almost within reach. Sylvester doesn't notice that as he grabs and misses, he's rising higher and higher off the floor.

Finally he notices—oh-oh!—and realizes he can't fly. A perplexed look comes over his face. Then down he falls, leaving a spreadeagled cat-shaped hole in the floor. The clip restarts. Wilson can't get over the banal ugliness of the sight, this brightly animated few seconds of Oof! and Gasp! and Kapow! framed by a camo-painted combat suit, this human being reduced to a death utterance of streaming video. Nor can he connect these silly albeit somewhat ominous images with the surly badass who Basknight pretended to be and, in fact, was. Basknight's choice of privacy screen might, like his own, have been hastily considered, or maybe this was Basknight's way of flipping off the world, maybe

he realized how obscenely trivial it would appear to anyone finding his body. Then again, maybe the clip embodies an absurdist view of life that he kept hidden from his peers, most of whom perceived him to have the famished appetites and clouded sensibility of a creature in a shooter game.

GRob nudges him and Wilson glances up to see that she's pointing at Baxter, who has taken a seat among the flowers some twenty yards away.

"Baxman?" he says.

"Don't come near me," Baxter says. "Come near me, I'll mess you up."

GRob puts a hand on Wilson's arm and says, "Leave him," but he shakes her off and says, "Baxter, this is total bullshit!!"

"Walk away," Baxter says.

"That all you got for me? Walk away? After the shit we seen together?"

"That's it?"

Silence.

"You better talk to me, Baxter!"

"Devil's loose in the world, man. Where we goin' go? The devils, they got it all now."

Fuming, Wilson can't fit his feelings inside of words.

"War's over, man," says Baxter. "I'm shuttin' it down."

"Baxter! Goddamn it!"

"I'm with you, man. I hear what you sayin'. But you need to walk away.

Right now."

His words are badly slurred, almost unintelligible, and Wilson understands from this it's too late for argument, that his own words, if he could find them, would form merely an annoying backdrop to whatever sweet ride of thought Baxter has

chosen to rush away on. Tears are coming and he's furious at Baxter. Were their good times and shared fear simply prelude to this muscle-spasm of an exit? Did people just invent each other, just imagine they were tight with one another ...?

"Charlie." GRob touches his hand and Wilson jerks it back from her angrily, saying, "Don't call me that! I hate that fucking name!"

"I know," she says. "Hate's good."

As they move off smartly across the field, Wilson glances back to see the cute yellow canary and the skuzzy black-and-white cat cavorting on Basknight's faceplate, growing ever smaller, ever more indistinct. He doesn't know what's on Baxter's privacy screen and he doesn't want to know.

Baxter's always changing it. From an old Pong game to a photograph of a Russian meteor crater to an African mask. All stupidly announcing some sloganlike truth about the soon-to-be skull behind them. Wilson decides he's sticking with shots of the Rockies for his screen. They don't say diddly about him, which is better than saying one dumbass thing, and it'll never seem as monstrously puerile as Basknight's Sylvester and Tweety Bird cartoon. The figures of Baxter and Basknight dwindle to anonymous lumps and Wilson summons them onto his helmet display, taking an angle low to the ground and looking up, holding them both in frame so they resemble ancient statues, relics of a vanished civilization, weathered soldier-shaped monuments commemorating something, though he's forgotten what.

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1830 hours

Wilson no longer feels like scrap iron, like a wild dog, like a movie star with mad fucking weapons. He feels like Charles Newfield Wilson. Charlie.

Walking through the valley of the shadow, waiting for the jaws that bite, the claws that snatch, and whatever else hell has in store. Scared shitless, even though he's got a pretty, deadly blond at his side. He knows he should run some battle juice, but does more IQ instead. Dangerous levels. His mind's eye wheels, encompassing fragmented images of childhood, phosphorescent flares like the explosive firings of neurons, an assortment of sense memories accumulated during the past few hours, a kaleidoscopic succession of what look to be

magazine photographs, most relating to a museum display of Egyptian artifacts, these and other categories of things remembered all jumbled together, as if overloaded files are spilling their contents and causing short circuits. The insides of his eyes itch, he can't swallow, his heart slams, and his vision has gone faintly orange. But soon the flurry and discomfort settle, and it's as if he's been fine-tuned, as if a bullet-smooth burnished cylinder has been slotted into place inside his twitchy self, a stabilizing presence, and he begins, for the first time, to have a grasp on the situation, to not merely react to its hopelessness, to accept it, and, by accepting it, by announcing it calmly to himself, stating its parameters, he comes to believe that all is not lost. They are in hell, maybe with a patch or two of heaven mixed in, and they cannot contact command. As with any battlefield, the situation is fluid, and, as has been the case with other battlefields, they can't trust their instrumentation. He's been here before. Not in so daunting a circumstance, perhaps, not on a field that—as this one seems to—was fluid to the point that it actually changed shape. But essentially they're in the same position they were in during other covert actions, conflicts that never made the news back home. Recognizing this gives him hope. If your situation is fluid, you have to become fluid. You have to understand the unique laws of the place and moment and let them dictate the course of your survival. He switches off his instruments. He no longer wants to see things as digital cartoons or confuse the issue with readings that can't be trusted. They're on the right path, he thinks. Going forward. GRob nailed it. Going forward is who they are.

As they walk through the flowers, GRob asks him about Colorado, where he went to school, did he have a girlfriend, and all like that. By this, he realizes how scared she is. She's never been much of a talker, just a mad fucking soldier like Perdue ... and maybe, he thinks, that's at the heart of her fear. GRob and Perdue were tighter than he and Baxter. They went on leave together, and there's no doubt they were lovers, though Wilson knows GRob had an eye for guys. Plenty of times he caught her checking him out. But GRob and Perdue were a unit, they neutralized each other's fear and now Perdue's gone, GRob's unsure of herself. In context of this, he wonders why he's not more unsure of himself now that Baxter's gone. He doesn't believe it's just that IQ is insulating him from fear, and he's coming to accept that he and Baxter didn't have anywhere near as strong a bond as GRob and Perdue.

What purpose they served for one another is unclear. Yet even as he thinks this, he suspects that he does understand their relationship, that they weren't really tight, they were flimsily aligned, doing big brother-little brother schtick to pass

the time.

“I got this thing about flowers,” GRob says, and takes a swipe with her rifle as she tramples down the yellow blooms. “My uncle ran a funeral home in Tucson. I used to hafta come over after school because my mama was working and my uncle would babysit me. It was like flowers all over the place. Guys would give me flowers, I’d hate it ‘cause they made me think about dying.”

“They’re just flowers,” Wilson says. “Not a metaphor ... right?”

She gives a salty laugh. “Yeah, I forgot.” They walk on a few paces, then she says, “Hard to believe it, though,” and this sparks something in Wilson, a flicker of comprehension, something that seems hopeful, helpful, but he doesn’t pursue it, he’s too concerned with keeping her straight.

“I’m not re-upping after this tour,” he says. “This does it for me.”

After a pause she says, “You said that after Angola.”

“Captain Wilts got me drunk and preached me a sermon. What can I say? I was a jerk.”

“I’m short. I got six weeks left. I could take it all in leave and catch a plane somewhere.”

“Tangiers, how about?”

“Y’know, I been thinking about that. Maybe not Tangiers. Somewhere away from the Arabs, man. Somewhere closer to home. Maybe Mexico.”

“Mexico’s cool.”

“My parents used to take me down when I was a kid. There was a town on the Gulf. Tecolutla. A real zero place. Palm trees, a beach, some crummy hotels. No tourists. I’d like to go there.”

“Might not be like that anymore.”

“Tecolutla’s never gonna change. A few more people ... sure. But there’s nothing there. The beach isn’t even that good. Just a whole buncha nothing ...

and mosquitoes. I could use some nothing for a while.”

“You might get bored.”

“Well, that’d be your job, wouldn’t it? To see I didn’t.”

“Guess we better practice so I can prepare not to be boring. Get to know your ins and outs.”

She doesn’t respond right away and Wilson wonders if she’s actually considering dropping trou and fucking in the flowers, but then she says, “I’m reading heat. Fluctuating. Like it’s a fire up ahead.”

Wilson switches on his helmet array. A wall of fire over two miles deep, maybe an hour away, extending to infinity. “The suits might handle it, we move through fast.”

“They might,” GRob says. “They might not.”

Though her faceplate he reads a grievous uncertainty, an emotion he refuses to let himself feel. He knows to his soul there’s hope, a path, a trick to all this, a secret adit, a magic door. “I’m not shutting down,” he says.

“And it’s no use going back. Like Baxman said, ‘Devil’s loose in the world.’”

“You believe that?”

“You don’t?”

“I saw it, but ... I don’t know.”

“What else you gonna believe?” he asks. “That we can walk back out, debrief, hit the PX? That we’re tripping? That we made this shit up? Those are the options.”

Her face hardens and she won’t meet his eyes.

“You wanna hang out?” he asks. “You wanna take a rest, sit for a while? Maybe lie down? Just chill? I’ll do it. I’ll stay with you, that’s what you want. But I’m not shutting down.”

Time inches along, five seconds, ten, twenty, becoming a memorial slowness, a graven interlude measuring her decision. She looks up at him.

“I’m not shutting down.”

Wilson sees from her expression that they’re a unit now, they’ve become a function of one another’s trust in a way he and Baxter did not. They’re locked tighter, like a puzzle of plastic and metal and blood with two solid parts. They’ve made an agreement deeper than a week together after the war, one either he can’t articulate or doesn’t want to.

“Fight the fire with fire,” he says.

“Summers back in Arizona, I walked my dog in worse heat’n that.”

“Gotta burn the flames, GRob.”

“Muscle up to that motherfucker ... make it hurt!”

“We trained hotter places! We breathed smoke and shit ash trays!”

“We racked out in the fiery fucking furnace!”

“Are you glad about it?”

“Damn straight I’m glad! I got some tunes I wanna play for whatever bitches live in there!”

“High caliber tunes?”

“Golden gospel hits, man!”

“Can you walk through the fire?”

“Can a little girl make a grown man cry?”

“Can we walk through the fire?”

“Aw, man! We are so motivated! We’re gonna be waltzing through it!”

.

1926 hours

They hear the roar of the fire before they see its glow, and once they're close enough to see the wall itself, no end to it, reaching to the roof of the cave, a raging, reddish orange fence between them and the unknown, a fence that divides the entire world or all that remains of it ... once they're that close, the roar sounds like a thousand engines slightly mistimed, and once they're really close, less than fifty feet, the sound is of a single mighty engine, and the cooling units in their suits kick in. GRob's faceplate reflects the flickering light, the ghost of her face visible behind it. As they stand before the wall of fire, considering the question it's asked of them, Wilson goes wide on his display screen, taking an angle low to the ground and from the side, looking upward at their figures. It appears they're in partial eclipse, the front of their suits ablaze, the backs dark, their shadows joined and cast long over the yellow flowers, two tiny people dwarfed by a terrifying magic. He shifts the focus, keeping low and viewing them from the perspective of someone closer to the fire. Their figures seem larger and have acquired a heroic brightness. It's a toss-up, he thinks, which angle is the truest. GRob says, "I can't believe this shit," and he's about to say something neutral, a mild encouragement, when it hits him, the thing that's been missing, the hidden door, the trick to all this. It's so stunningly simple, he doubts it for a moment. It's an answer that seems to rattle like a slug in a tin cup. But it's so perfect, he can't sustain doubt. "Yeah, you do," he says. "You believe it."

She stares at him, bewildered.

"Where are we?" he asks.

"Fuck you mean?"

"Hell. We're in hell."

"I guess ... yeah."

"The Islamic hell."

He runs it down for her. The induction of chaos by means of military device, the imposition of distinct form upon primordial matter, the anthropomorphic effect, the villagers believing that the flowers were the gateway to Paradise, and then there it was in its metaphorical form. But in this instance there was a truth

congruent to the anthropomorphic effect: the cosmic disruption caused by the materialization of Paradise on the earthly plane brought about the day of judgment, allowed hell to be hauled up from wherever it rested on seventy thousand volts or ropes. Or maybe the villagers lied, maybe they wanted the Americans to think it was Paradise and knew it was hell all along. Maybe that's why what they told the interrogators was classified.

"So? We been through all this," GRob says.

"Are we in hell?"

"Yeah ... I mean, I don't know!"

"You do know!"

"Okay! I know! Fuck!"

The way she's staring reminds him of how Baxter would look at him when he said something Baxter thought was dumb. But this isn't dumb, this is their only chance, and he continues laying it out for her.

"We're in hell," he says. "The Islamic hell. Which means Islam is the way."

"The way?"

"The true religion. We're in the middle of a verse from the Qur'an. It's the perfect fucking irony. An American bomb brings about the Islamic day of judgment. And now the path to Paradise lies ahead. How do you escape from hell? People intercede for you. They make a case you deserve getting in."

"You're trashed!"

"How can you not believe it? We're here!"

She has, he thinks, been on the verge of scoffing again, but when he says this, her stubborn expression fades.

"You see? We're not infidels ... not anymore. We're believers. We have to believe 'cause it's happened to us." He points at the wall of flame. "You said it yourself. We gotta go through somewhere bad to get somewhere good. You felt

that. Well, here we fucking are! We have to go through hell to reach Paradise. It makes sense that the last people allowed into Paradise would be infidels ... converts. That they'd be the lowest of the low. It makes raghead sense."

"We're not converts," she said. "You hafta take classes and shit, don'tcha? To convert."

"We been jumped into Islam, we don't need classes." He puts his hands on her shoulders. "What's the name of God?"

She wants to buy into it, he can tell, but she's hesitant. He asks again, and she says, tentatively, "Allah?" Then she turns away from him. "This is so whack!"

"It's not! We been going like it wasn't happening. Ignoring the reality of the situation. It was there for us all along ... the answer. Only thing we had to do was accept where we were."

"But ..." GRob swings back around. "Even if you're right, man, why would anybody intercede for us?"

"I told you! It's the ragheads! They gotta have somebody to be sweeping up in heaven. What's better'n a couple of ex-infidels they can rank on. Look! You can't even question it. We survived! Out of seventy-two—out of the whole world, maybe—you'n me survived. There's gotta be a reason for that."

He keeps at her, explaining the obvious, the simple truth he's excavated from the wreckage of heaven and the fires of hell. He hears himself preaching at her like how Captain Wilts preached him into re-upping, trying to convince her that a walk in the fire is just what they need, a trip to salvation, and recognizing this similarity, seeing that he's conning her, even if it's for her own good, even if the con is sincere, intended to instill faith, because that's what'll get them through, faith, the fundament of all religion ... recognizing this, he suspects he may be conning himself, and understands that, also like Captain Wilts, he's not giving her the whole picture. He's not sure there's room for two infidels in heaven. Maybe only the last person allowed in can be an infidel ... at least that's the sense he has from what Baxter told them. If such is the case, he wants it to be GRob. He's evangelical about this, he desires in his soldierly way to save her. She's his sister in the shit, his blooded friend and ally, and possibly she's more than that, so he continues banging words into her head, preaching up a storm, until he sees faith catch in her, a spark of understanding flaring into a flame and

incinerating doubt. Watching her face glowing with reflected fire and inner fire, his own doubts evaporate. There is a reason the two of them have gotten this far. They're both going to make it.

"Do you hear what I'm saying?" he asks, and GRob says, "Loud and clear, man!"

"Where are we going?"

"Paradise!"

"What're we gonna do there?"

"Walk in gardens of silver and gold!"

"How we gonna get there?"

"With superior firepower!"

It's not the answer he wants and he repeats his question.

She falters and then says, "By the grace of God!", but she almost makes it seem another question.

"By the will of Allah!" he says.

"By the will of Allah!"

"Allah be praised!"

He pounds the message into her, motivating like he's never done before, but it's not his usual bullshit. He feels it; the words sing out of him like silver swords shivering from their sheaths until at last she's singing with him, delirious and shiny-eyed, and she lifts her rifle above her head with one hand and shouts, "There is no God but Allah!"

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2009 hours

They touch before they enter the fire. Not skin to skin, just resting their helmets

together, acknowledging the agreement they have made, a soul contract that will cover either a few minutes, an eternity, or a week in Tecolotla. Then they walk forward into the flames. Wilson watches them on his helmet display, two silhouetted man-shaped robots slipping seamlessly inside the glaring reddish orange wall, and then there's no time to watch, he's moving fast, the cooling unit of his suit already beginning to labor.

The floor of hell is plated in yellow metal, at least Wilson thinks it's yellow and thinks it's plated. Hard to be sure of color from within the lurid, inconstant glare of the flames, and it might not be plated, it might be a vein of some perfect substance, God in mineral form. It's neither gold nor brass, for those metals would melt from the heat and this metal is unmarred. It's inscribed with the serpentine flourishes and squiggles of Arabic characters, each one longer than a man, and they are written everywhere he looks. The text of the Qur'an, perhaps, or of some other sacred book undelivered to the earth. In the depths of the brightness around him, he sees movement that's not the liquid movement of fire and shapes that aren't the shapes of flame, intimations of heavy, sluggish forms, and he swings his rifle in quick covering arcs. The rifle is a beautiful thing. Should he fall in the fire, overcome by heat, it will continue to function, lying there to be used by whatever weaponless soldier happens by, irrespective of the fact that no soldier will ever pass this way again. He keeps GRob on his left, concentrated more on her target environment than on his. The roaring of the inferno sounds different now, a river sound, a flowing, undulant rush, and the ruddy light comes to seem an expression of that rush, its flickering rhythms sinuous and almost soothing.

Half a mile in, he knows they're in trouble. The heat. His suit, sheathing him in machinery and plastic, fitting tightly to his skin, extrudes an ointment and injects him with mild numbing agents. He hears GRob gasping over their private channel. His helmet, already dark, darkens further. According to his instrument array, they are surrounded by a myriad of invisible lives and everything else reads infinite. He doesn't switch off the array, but realizes he can't trust it. Allah, he says to himself, and lets the sonority and power of the name bloom inside his head like a firework, a great inscription of cool radiance, a storm of peace that lets him ignore the pain of his blistering skin. They keep going. It's who they are. There's no quit in this bad blond and her sixty-rounds-per-second man, this mad-ass detonatrix and her Colorado killer ... The silly lyrics of his thoughts make him gleeful, unwary, seduced by the golden rock 'n' roll legend he'd like to fashion of their walk, and, needing to steady himself, he boosts more IQ.

Mega-dangerous levels. He's long since maxed out, but it doesn't matter. He'll live or he'll die by the will of God and by that alone.

Three-quarters of the way across, by Wilson's estimate, and now they're in serious trouble. Slowed by narcotic injections, their blisters evolved into burns, stumbling, veering to the side. It takes too much energy to talk, so he puts on his tunes, transmits them to GRob, and feels their connection strengthen. Her green telltale on his array blinks on and off. A signal. She feels him, too. He'd walk closer to her, but is afraid he might lurch and knock her down. A slow crawl of thought runs through his head. Images and the names that generate them. Like beads on the necklace of his life. GRob.

Baxter. Home. Paradise. Allah. He understands that the nature of God is fire and ice, balm and poison, this and anti-this, all unified in a marvelous design, the design he's treading, and if their act of faith succeeds and they reach Paradise, they will merely have stepped one inch in the eyes of God, because that's how far the distance lies between faith and disbelief. His whole life has been spent traveling that inch, and now, able to grasp the sublimity of God's design, the cleverness of His infinite text, Wilson is overcome with joy, his scorched awareness momentarily illuminated, made into a crystal lens through which he goes eye-to-eye with Allah, with the great golden white figure who fills the void ... and then he sees something real. Not just an intimation of form, but something solid, having substance and volume. He switches off his tunes and peers at it. A long flexible limb, that's his first thought. Black, with a mosaic pattern of some pale color.

Whipping toward them out of the flames. A tail, he realizes. An immense fucking tail. He starts to bring up his rifle, but his reflexes are dulled, his fingers clumsy, and before he can lock down the target, the tip of the tail coils about GRob's waist and snatches her high. She cries out, "Charlie!"

while she's being flipped about high overhead. Then the tail withdraws. As it does, as it whips away from Wilson, lashing GRob to and fro, the force of displacement sucks back the flame, creating a channel, and revealed in the fiery walls of the channel is an iconography of torment. Crucifixions, quarterings, flayings, eviscerations, hangings, people burdened by massive yokes. Demons frolicking among them. Hideous and subhuman, their skins scalded away, their striated muscles and sinews exposed. But Wilson barely notices them, staring toward the end of the channel where resides a lizard the size of a dinosaur. A

salamander with a mosaic black-and-pale skin. Its hindquarters and tail emergent, its flat head and supple neck and one powerful foreleg also emergent, the remainder of its body cloaked in flame.

Its glazed yellow eye rests balefully upon him. The salamander twitches its tail toward its gaping black-gummed mouth, and, with the delicacy of a dowager nibbling a shrimp impaled on a toothpick, it nips off GRob's head.

Wilson finally manages to lock onto the salamander and opens up, but flames wash back to fill the channel. Both the tormented and their tormentors vanish, reabsorbed into the flames, once again becoming a myriad of invisible lives, as if the creation of the channel stretched their grain and made them visible for a few seconds. Wilson has no idea whether or not his bullets have struck their target. Everything is as before. The fire, the golden script beneath his feet, the intimations of movement. All his readings are infinite. He's too shocked, too enfeebled, to scream, but his mind's clear and his mind is screaming. He can still see GRob's blood jetting across the salamander's snout from her severed neck arteries, an image that invokes nausea and gains in memory the luster of a vile sexuality. He wants to spend what's left of his time seeking out the salamander, tracking it across the Word of Allah and exterminating it. He's hot with anger, but his will is stunned, unequal to the duty, and after standing there a while, long enough to feel discomfort. he goes stumbling forward again, heartsick, trying to blot out the vision of her death, to cope with loss, an impossible chore since he's not certain how much he's lost. The measure of his grief seems too generous and he thinks he must be grieving for himself as well, for what he's about to lose, though that's the easiest route to take, to avoid looking closely at things. His faith has been shaken and restoring it's got to be his priority.

Perhaps, he thinks, GRob's faith was to blame. Perhaps she was killed by doubt and not by chance. Perhaps it wasn't only his protection that failed her, perhaps he didn't preach to her enough. There's guilt for Wilson at every turn, but justification serves him best, and he re-armors his faith with the notion that GRob simply couldn't abandon her old preoccupations, couldn't wrap her head around the new.

He can't remember if he's facing the right way, whether he spun completely around after he fired and is now walking back toward the flowers. This causes him some panic, but the dizziness he's feeling, the pain and confusion, they trump panic, they thin it out until it's an unimportant color in his head. Faith, he

says to himself. Keep the faith. He goes another quarter-mile. The slowest quarter-mile yet. His air's become a problem. Too hot. Baking his lungs, drying the surfaces of his eyes. Either the fire's darkening or else a vast darkness is growing visible beyond the flames.

Wilson knows if it isn't the latter, he's a dead man. Drugs are keeping the pain damned up, but he can feel it waiting to burst through and roll over him. The cooling unit in his helmet has done its job. His face isn't badly burned. But the other units have been overtaxed and he doesn't want to imagine how he looks under the suit. He's weaving, staggering, almost falling, propping himself up with his rifle, moving like a barfly at closing time. Like he's coming out of the desert dying of thirst, struggling toward the oasis. A shade tree, he thinks. That's what Baxter said. First a riverbank and then a shade tree. Then Paradise. He'll have to find the shade tree. In the dark. He can't get a handle on his thoughts. Allah. That's the only thought that holds and it's scarcely a thought, more of an announcement, as if he's some sort of fucked-up clock and every so often, irregularly, he bongs, "Allah," a sound that gradually fades away into emotions and ideas that never quite announce themselves. Charlie. That name sputters up once in a while, too. Calling him Charlie means she must have thought of him that way ... which makes the name more acceptable. But he can't afford to care about the sweetness this implies.

More salamanders appear, first dozens, then hundreds of them, doubtless drawn by the kill. A slithering herd of identical terrors. They prowl alongside his path, crawling over one another's tails, snapping and poking their snaky heads toward him, scuttling ahead and then peering back as if they're saying, Come on, man! You can make it. Maybe we'll let you make it ... or maybe not. He's afraid, but fear won't take root in him, his mental soil's too dried out to support it. Without the governance of fear, his courage is reborn. He begins to find a rhythm as he walks. The bongs grow more regular, aligning with the soldiering beats of his heart, until it's like they're overlapping, one "Allah" declining into the rise of the next, and underneath that sound—no, surrounding it!—are voices too vast to hear, spoken by people too large to see. He senses them as fluctuating pressure, the shapes of their words, like the flames, flowing around him. The intercession, he thinks. They're singling him out, debating his worth, judging his faith. He can't worry about their judgment, though. He's got his job, he's tasked to the max. Keep bonging, keep ringing out the name of God. He's entirely self-motivating now.

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2322 hours

Paradise awaits.

Somewhere faraway in the absence, like a ragged hole in black cloth open onto a glowing white sky—a light, cool and promising. That’s what Wilson sees on waking. The rest is darkness. There’s a rushing in his ears that might be a faint roaring from the wall of fire, but he believes it’s a river nearby and he’s on the bank. He’s not overheated any longer. Tired, but calm. Pain is distant. The drugs are good. His helmet array is still lit, though the digital display screen is out, or else it’s showing nothing except black.

He feels remote, cast down upon a foreign shore, and he gets an urge to look at his pictures, summons them up. Mom. Dad. Ol’ Mackie. Laura. They don’t hold his interest for long. They’re past considerations. He checks his medal file. It still seems incoherent—the IQ’s worn off—but nobody’s going to be reading it, anyway. Then he decides to change number 10 on his 10 Things Specialist Charles N. Wilson Wants You To Know list. Just for the hell of it.

Maybe they give out medals in Paradise. They give you better clothes, jewels and shit ... so Baxter said. Why not a medal?

He wonders where he is, exactly. The border of hell, for sure. The shade tree, he supposes, lies between the light and the spot he’s resting in.

Thinking comes hard. He keeps drifting off, hearing clicking noises, screams, the voices of ghosts. He considers doing more IQ. No, he tells himself. Let them see what they’re getting. The infidel, dumb as a stump, but janitor-smart. It’s what they expect. Lights start up behind his eyes, though not the light of heaven. That’s steady and these are actinic flashes.

Phosphorous flares and rocket rounds. Some taking longer to fade against the blackness than others. As if inside him there’s a battlefield, a night engagement. He’s transfixed by their bursting flower-forms. It’s time, he realizes. Time to get going. Tempting as it is to lie there. He blanks out for a while and the thought of GRob brings him back. At least the thought begins with GRob. Her face. And then her face changes to Baxter’s face, to another, to another and another, the changes occurring faster and faster, imposed on the same head shape, until the

faces blur together like he's seeing the faces of everyone who was alive, the history of the world, of judgment day, of something, refined to a cool video image ...

He's got to get up.

That's an order, Wilson! Move your ass!

Yes, sir! Fuck you, sir!

Charlie! You're going to miss the bus!

Damn it, Charlie! Do I have to do this every morning?

All right! I'm up! Jesus Christ!

The Lord's name in vain, Charlie. Every time you say it, He takes a note, he writes it down on the floor of hell in golden letters you can't read ...

You dumb little fucker! I swear to God, man! Stand up again, I'm not gonna knock you down, I'm gon' fuck you up!

Charlie!

This last voice, a woman's scream, does the trick. It's an effort, but he makes it, he's up. On his hands and knees. He can't stand, his knees won't lock. His arms are trembly, but he's okay for strength and only mildly dizzy.

He can't feel much at all, not even the ground beneath him. It's like he's resting on something as solid and as insubstantial as an idea, and because the idea is without form or void, it's impossible to get his bearings. But he knows what to do. Find the tree. Trust to faith that you'll find it. Throw a move on the world before it throws one on you. Here we go. Left hand forward. Drag the right knee. Right hand forward. Drag the left knee.

Breathe. You repeat that ten thousand times, Wilson, you just might get to be a soldier. Alternate method. Sliding both hands forward and then dragging the haunches. Slower, but more stable. It's a tough choice, but he'll work it out, he'll devise a pattern of alternation, a system by which he can rest different muscles at different times and thus maximize his stamina. He knows how to do this shit. It's

all he's ever done, really. Going forward against the crush of force and logic. Moving smartly when smart movement is called for. Crawling through shadow, looking for shade.

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10 Things Specialist Charles N. Wilson Wants You To Know

1. Everything I've ever known has been no more than a powerful conviction.
2. Nothing motivates like sex and death and sound effects.
3. Politics is the Enemy.
4. Jesus and Mohammed would probably hang out together.
5. GRob is a hottie, maybe not as cute as Laura Witherspoon, but a woman who can kick ass is a definite turn-on.
6. Love is all there is, but there ain't enough to go around.
7. War is the geometry of chaos.
8. Only in the grip of fear can I appreciate the purity of my life's disguise.
9. Survival as an occupation: I am the worker bee. Survival as religion: I am its revenant priest.
10. My pink-and-black skateboard with the design of the demon gleaming the cube, it is the bomb!

The End

SQUAT

Donna McMahon

Donna McMahon is a Canadian writer of SF. She is a member of SFWA and SF Canada. "Squat" is reprinted here from the Spring 2000 issue of the Canadian SF magazine, On Spec.

Usually I'm proud of my job and I don't let any crap worry me.

When I served with the Peacekeepers in Peru and Estonia I saw a lot worse. But Friday morning as I watched the Special Duty guy, Kahlifa, set the magnetic brakes on the gurney and check the prisoner's restraints, I felt something inside me snap. I shoved my clammy hands roughly into my pockets and swallowed hard, telling myself it was just after-effects of all the meds during quarantine before I shipped up to orbit.

Kahlifa's gloved fingers searched the prisoner's thin brown wrist, looking for a good vein for the IV needle. Behind him a sweaty saline bag hung from the IV tree, transparent tubing snaking down from it.

In a couple of minutes Kahlifa would take hold of that tube and inject it with sodium pentathol, then with the lethal stuff.

I didn't want to watch until I had to, so I stared at the name tag of the prisoner's coveralls ("Pajit") but my gaze strayed to his face. His eyes were open, giant drug-glazed pupils staring up. He looked about fourteen, I realized with sick shock. He blinked, and for a second I was back in the Bloor Street copshop watching Jimmy emerge shame-faced from the holding area into the brightly lit waiting room, blinking, trying to hold himself tall, too scared and ashamed to meet his father's eyes. My stomach churned.

"No!" I said suddenly.

Kahlifa turned to look at me and for a second I thought his impenetrable Arab face might be showing surprise behind the surgical mask. That's another dicking regulation, by the way. There's nothing medical about executions—I figure the masks are for us to hide behind. Like a death squad.

Kahlifa glanced at the prisoner, then nodded towards the door but I didn't want a conference. I pulled off my mask and hurled it.

"I'm not witnessing this," I said through a tight throat. "Find somebody else."

I wanted to slam my way out, but the big air-seal doors on space stations don't slam. I punched the release lever and hauled at the door too hard, losing my balance and tripping over the sill. I'd only been back a few days after a year dirtside and I was still getting my low-gravity reflexes back.

Mad at myself and Kahlifa and everybody else, I started jogging anti-spinward along Corridor One, compensating automatically for the weird effects caused by one quarter gee of inertial pull along the outer edge of the station. Running is easy once your eyes and inner ear get used to it—the real trick is stopping your mass with limited traction, especially on the anti-spinward or downhill slope. It's kind of like ice skating inside a big tire coated with plastic.

I fought back a sudden panicky sense of being trapped. It hits all of us sometimes when we start thinking there's nowhere to go. I couldn't face reporting back to my shift. I wasn't ready to sleep in my cube or eat in the mess, so that left the gym, where I could beat on something until I felt better.

And it didn't matter which way I went, I'd get there. Corridor One circles the outside of the whole wheel-shaped station, accessing control rooms, tech junctions, crew quarters, and spoke access. Total monotony. The only way you can tell the doors apart is read the signs. Except....

My head whipped around, I missed a step and plowed into a bulkhead with my shoulder, skidded to a stop, and then backtracked to the door of the Legal Office. Since my last shift an ornate sign had been painted on it with fancy engraving script.

B.J. Quinn, LL.D.

*Please present your card to the Clerk
of the Chambers for an appointment*

I studied it with awe and not just for its up-your-regs boldness. I always admire guys with talent—I'm just dead average at everything.

Then an idea hit me and I pressed the buzzer.

"Not in!" boomed a voice, distantly audible even through the thick door.

"It's Olmstead," I shouted.

"Here on business?"

"Nope," I lied.

"Oh. Very well. Enter."

I punched the release and the door swung slowly open revealing a large man sandwiched behind a small plastic desk littered with clipboards and datadisks. Ben hadn't changed much since I'd last seen him. Maybe a little less hair up top, a little more gray in his non-regulation beard, and a few extra pounds on his paunch. He's way over the weight limit for station personnel, but the consortium has a hard time finding qualified lawyers who'll spend a year on a prison space station. Ben gets away with a lot.

He reached over and offered his hand without standing up.

"Commiserations, old man. I see we have our Canadian back on the Mount."

It was always strange to hear that deep, polished English voice coming out of a slob. I shook Ben's hand and made myself grin. "I see they're still scraping the bottom of the legal barrel."

"The legal bottle, don't you mean?" He gestured with his coffee mug. "Care for a dram?"

I shook my head and grabbed the visitor's chair. Most guys put up landscapes on the walls to make the rooms seem bigger, but Ben has flimsies of floor-to-ceiling bookcases packed with old books. I could almost smell the dust. And Ben's chairs had been detached from their floor bolts, rigged to tilt backwards and upholstered with vandalized bedding. All against regs, of course. I sat back and raised my feet onto his desk with a satisfying thump. What we all wouldn't give

to do this in the main control room....

“I trust you won’t mind if I top mine up,” said Ben, reaching into his desk drawer. Booze is against regs, too, but we make “Mountain ‘shine” and Ben’s into it all the time. That’s probably why he’s here instead of in some high-priced firm planetside.

“Playing hooky?”

“Pulled witness duty.”

“Ah. Pajit.” Ben dropped the jovial act and looked at me sympathetically. “Sure about that dram?”

“Maybe later. Look, what the hell’s that kid doing here? He looks about fourteen.”

“I don’t send them up here,” observed Ben coolly, and I realized that my voice had come out too harsh. Like I was blaming him.

I tried to unclench my hands and relax.

“Sorry, Ben—I’m carrying some voltage.”

He shrugged and stared down into his ‘shine.

“I doubt there’d be many criminal lawyers if we had to witness the consequences of our actions,” he said with sudden bitterness, and I realized suddenly that he was quite drunk.

“Yeah, well I refused.”

He frowned up at me for a second, then I saw understanding dawn.

His eyebrows rose.

“I could have sworn I heard you say ‘refused’.”

“Yeah,” I said defensively, trying not to feel like an idiot. This was going to buy me trouble I didn’t even want to think about yet. “It wasn’t right!”

“‘Right?’ What a quaintly Kantian notion to issue forth from a cog in the great wheel of incarceration.”

I don’t always understand Ben, but I know when I’m being sneered at and it must have showed on my face. Ben waved a conciliatory hand at me.

“Sorry, Mike. So I assume you’re here to ask me about Pajit.”

I nodded. Ben sighed and reached for his antique keyboard.

Yeah, keyboard. Montgolfier Station was knocked together a decade ago from old industrial overstock and army surplus—cheap antiques. I try not to think about it too much.

Ben’s eyes flicked to the ancient tube monitor that takes up half his desk, but I didn’t think he really needed to look at the records. He just does it for show.

“Manuel Pajit. Wharf rat from Bangkok. He’s a squat, of course, but independent cargo carriers hire a lot of illegals. Pajit was arrested in Hong Kong for the rape and murder of two boys in different ports.

Young cretin claimed to be eighteen, but I very much doubt it. He was tried in adult court and convicted in short order since he couldn’t afford a live lawyer. He received a twenty-five year sentence.”

“So what’s he doing here?” I interrupted. Most of our inmates are political—terrorists, counter-intelligence, ex-government and corporate execs mainly, shipped up for low gravity manufacturing work. Governments pay to get rid of them and the consortium gets free labor. I hear there’s dirtside lawyers working on appeals and more appeals but nobody’s left here yet. Alive, that is.

“Patience, Mike, I’m giving you background. Most nations extradite foreign criminals if they can, but Pajit is a third generation refugee—no citizenship—so China was stuck with him. Then a last minute slot opened up in their Montgolfier quota and some bright bureaucrat in Beijing had the idea of transferring him here. He was sent up five months ago.”

He paused for a long swig from his mug.

“Meanwhile, relatives of the victims appealed Pajit’s sentence in Chinese court,

demanding the death penalty. They won, but then had to apply to International Court, which presides over Montgolfier Station. International Court reluctantly agreed, mostly I think because they didn't want the expense of contesting the case. Hence, our execution order."

"Now, this is where our case becomes interesting." Ben's voice took on dramatic relish. "Police in Panama became interested in one of Pajit's erstwhile crewmates. Earlier this month they hauled him in and thanks to their gentle persuasions he confessed to several murders, including those that Pajit was convicted of."

"Hold, it," I said, startled. "Are you telling me that Pajit's innocent?"

"It would certainly appear so."

For a second I just stared at him.

"But we nearly killed him!"

Ben gave a genial shrug.

"It's a question of process, Mike. An execution order has gone through. To cancel it, a stay must be filed via Panama, China and International Court. Pajit, of course, has no country to initiate legal action on his behalf. Which leaves it in the hands of your local spinning charity barrister. I'm putting together the formware for a stay and full pardon, but the backlog of International cases is immense, even for items classified as urgent."

"That's insane! Surely you can do something—pull strings!"

"I think you'd be more comfortable sitting, old man," said Ben quietly, and I realized that I was standing up with both fists clenched.

I controlled myself with effort and sat.

Ben leaned forward, put his elbows on the desk and steeped his fingers.

"I appreciate your indignation, but let us for a moment discuss reality. I'm the sole official legal counsel for over two hundred prisoners whose jurisdictional and legal status on this geosynchronous gulag is so complicated that nobody,

including me, understands it. It takes me days just to wade through the Byzantine mess of international records. Furthermore, I have no 'pull.' I and my antique amanuensis are at the very nadir of the legal food chain. With enormous effort I might get a pardon through quickly, but not quickly enough."

He paused, then added caustically, "And, between you and I, why should I?"

"Because he's not guilty!" I snapped, furious at his indifference.

Ben shrugged.

"A lethal injection is more merciful than life as a squat, or a sentence of involuntary buggery up here for that matter."

"So we should kill him?!" My hands clenched the padded chair as I fought for words. "Look, I know the law doesn't care what's right or wrong, just what's legal. I've seen how it works, Ben. All those people didn't die in Peru because soldiers and officials were evil.

People just followed goddamned regs and then let evil happen while we all sat on our goddamned hands!"

I had to stop because I realized that I was close to breaking down.

I've been doing that lately. Remembering too much about Peru, I guess. Ben was giving me a strange look so I tried to pull myself together.

"You can't fix the world, Mike."

"I'm not trying to. I can't even do the right thing half the time.

But I can stop from doing wrong things when I know they're wrong."

Ben opened his desk drawer again, then said acidly: "I quit trying a long time ago, old man. I'm just one of the evil minions of the law, and a contributor to countless horrors."

There was a brittle silence between us as he poured from the flask with the studied carefulness of someone who's very drunk. I sat there fighting for calm. I'd never intended to get so upset about Pajit, but when I thought back on him

lying on that gurney I knew I couldn't let it go. I took a deep breath and tried to speak levelly.

"Look, you said you needed time. How much?"

Ben sighed and tugged at his beard. "A week. Two would be better."

"If I buy you that time, will you do it?"

"You won't get the time, Mike."

"Look, Kahlifa's the only guy on this shift who's rated to do executions, and UN regs say he has to have a witness. I know him, he'll follow regs."

"True, but there are plenty of men on this station who want to earn a witnessing bonus."

"That's my problem. Will you do it?"

"Damnation!" he growled, but I heard a trace of amusement in his voice and I knew I had him. I leaned forward.

"Just say yes, Ben."

He sighed heavily.

"Heaven defend me from idealists and Canadians."

"Thanks."

I checked the time after I left Ben's office. Five twenty. "D"

watch ended at oh six hundred and my boss came on duty at "A"

watch. He'd want to chew me out, so why wait for an invitation?

Besides, I needed to talk to him.

When Geir Eldjarnsson walked in carrying his breakfast tray, I had my butt planted in the regulation uncomfortable plastic visitor's chair in the office. Plastic, by the way, is a vegetable-based gloop that's extruded into molds and hardens instantly in a vacuum. It looks like old chewing gum under fluorescent lights and it feels like slimy marble. During C/D watch I sit in the uncomfortable boss's chair behind the desk since I'm C/D watch supervisor. During A/B that chair is Geir's because he's the station commander. I just hoped I'd be sitting back there at eighteen hundred hours. The consortium doesn't like people who accept an assignment and then cop out.

Compared to Ben's office, ours is spartan. The only personal touch is the family pictures. On the spinside bulkhead I'd posted flimsies of Jimmy, my mom, and my wife Ash, who died in the '28

pandemic. The other wall is for Geir's wife and kids in Reykjavik.

Geir ignored me and dumped several pats of butter into a steaming bowl of oatmeal, then sprinkled it with salt and pepper, and started opening shrinkpacks of syrup. I stared. I'd forgotten about his breakfasts. He caught my look.

"So what's it to you, Olmstead? I suppose you still eat fried pig slices?"

"Uh... yeah."

He snapped back the ZG lid on his cup and took a swig of coffee.

I expected him to start giving me hell, but he surprised me.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Something's been burning you ever since you came up. How's Jimmy?"

"Fine."

"Uh huh."

He ate in silence while I sat. I knew this tactic. He'd wait me out until I told him something. Well, Geir had kids, too. I shifted awkwardly.

"Last month I got one of those four a.m. calls—the kind other parents get. 'Come down and post bail.' I thought Jimmy was sleeping at a friend's place for the weekend. Stupid, eh? Turns out they were out riding the T-line for drips, trips and breakins. He promised it wouldn't happen again, but hell, he's fifteen and I'm gone for another year...."

I risked looking over. Geir's face was somber.

"Sorry to hear that, Mike. I worry about mine when I'm up here, too."

"Yeah."

Geir studied me with shrewd blue eyes. He has white blond hair and an angelic face that makes him look much younger than forty, but he's no fool and he's tough. He was an officer in the Peacekeepers for fourteen years.

p>

"The med staff recommended you for another six months downtime. What the hell are you doing back?"

"Shit! I thought medical files were confidential!"

"Read your contract."

I hunched my shoulders uncomfortably.

"Med leave is half pay. Can't afford it."

"Maybe you can't afford not to."

I didn't answer. Geir sighed.

"Look, Mike, after I demobbed I got a real case of the PT's. I was smooth all those years under fire, but back home I started getting nightmares, flashbacks—everything. Scared hell out of my family. I ended up bunking in the Post Trauma ward for five months."

“I didn’t know,” I said, startled. Geir always seemed so much in control.

“I’m just saying maybe you should try it.”

“I’ll be OK,” I told him, stubbornly. “Anyway, I’m talking to somebody. Twice a week. I’m fine.”

“I hope so. I can’t afford a case of PT’s up here, Mike, especially a watch boss. I’m telling you straight that if you give me headaches, I’ll replace you in mid-shift and you’ll have to eat the performance fines.”

“I’m OK,” I repeated, trying to sound convincing. I leaned back in the chair, wishing it tilted like Ben’s. Geir pushed aside his tray.

“So you just walked out on witness duty.”

“Look, I don’t have a problem killing most of the viral shits we got up here. But Pajit is different.”

Geir made a sour face.

“Different, yeah, he’s a goddamned nightmare and I’ll be glad to get rid of him. He’s useless up here. No skills. And too young.

Every horny con has been shagging him. We’ve had to put him in solitary twice to heal up.”

“Ben says it’s a false conviction.”

“I heard.”

“So what’re you doing about it?”

Geir glared at me.

“I protested when he was sent up and I protested the execution order. HQ took it ‘under advisement.’ So I tried climbing rank and I was told flat to shut up. That’s all I can do.”

“You could refuse.”

“On what grounds?”

“I don’t know! Something!”

“Uh huh.” He drummed on his coffee mug. “We’re not breaking UN rules and there’s no risk to the safety of station personnel, so that’s it. And you know it. So you’re asking me to put my ass on the line, aren’t you?”

I nodded, uncomfortably aware of Geir’s daughters smiling down from the wall. Things are even tougher in Europe these days than Canada, especially for vets. Hell, every guy up here was desperate to keep his job. Geir seemed to read my mind.

“And do I tell the crew to disobey, too, maybe get fired?”

“But damn it, Ben says it’s just a matter of time until the pardon comes through!”

“I sat on the order for two goddamned weeks but HQ says I face discipline if I delay any longer.”

“But what happens when the pardon comes in and he’s already dead!”

“Not much. He’s just a squat, and anyway those ‘crats downstairs pass the buck at escape velocity.” Geir’s voice was bitter. “They’ll all be genuinely sorry for the fuck up but it really wasn’t their job and they couldn’t do anything about it.”

“Geir, that’s just what you’re saying.”

Geir’s face went rigid, and he glared at me. When he spoke, his voice was tight with fury.

“I’m not going to be your goddamned martyr, Olmstead! If you’re so big on morals you can wave your own balls in the wind.”

I crossed my arms, face burning, and looked away for a few seconds while I calmed down.

“Look, I’m sorry,” I managed finally. It’s just....”

But I couldn't find any words. What the hell was my problem anyway? I heard a squeal of plastic as Geir leaned back in his chair, locking his hands behind his head. There was a long silence.

"How many of the guys are talking like this, Mike?" he asked at last.

"Lots," I lied. "They feel the same."

Geir sighed.

"Look, I don't want to see the kid dead either. But I'm not going to take a dry dive. They'll bust you and me and everyone else down the line until one guy says yes."

I thought it over.

"What if I get unanimous support?"

"A job action? Shit!" Geir groaned. "I don't want to think about it. Anyway, you'd never pull it off. You'd need everybody, including Kahlifa."

"I can do that," I said, faking confidence I didn't feel. I rose and headed for the door. Geir's voice came from behind me.

"Pajit's re-scheduled for oh six hundred tomorrow. You've got until then."

I hate pitching. I got a job as a salesman once and didn't last three weeks. But I couldn't see any choice. So I started with the guys who'd just come off D shift and were eating in the mess.

They surprised me. At first they didn't say much, but when I explained what Ben said about Pajit being innocent, they all began talking about the asshole 'crats downstairs and how we'd be the ones to catch the blame for the kid's death, not them. After a bit they even got enthusiastic. Face it, there's not much to do up here. This could be the biggest event since the '31 riot. I caught some other guys on coffee break and then, at twelve hundred hours, the watch changeover. By twelve-thirty I figured I could count on seventeen out of twenty crew, and two would cave in with enough pressure. I'd provide the pressure if I had to.

That left Kahlifa, our “Special Duty” guy. Executioners get a bonus, but the consortium still has trouble finding volunteers. For one thing, everybody tends to avoid the Special Duty guy—he’s kind of a social leper. But I couldn’t put off talking to Kahlifa any longer, so I went to his bunk and buzzed.

I don’t know what I was expecting, but what I found wasn’t it.

Kahlifa sat cross-legged on his bed wearing an embroidered Moroccan cap and a bright blue caftan, playing chess against the computer. He’d used part of his precious five kilo baggage allowance to bring up a colorful striped floor mat and one of those little stools with a Koran on it. One wall was covered with family pictures. I pulled down the drop seat and squeezed my knees into the space between the seat and the bed. Before I could say anything he pulled out a thermal flask of coffee, so I had to sit there and drink with him and try to make small talk. Not easy. There’s no weather on the Mount and I’m sick of jokes about Toronto’s.

I’d used my supervisor clearance to peek at his file and found to my surprise that Kahlifa was only thirty-seven—five years younger than me. It was his craggy brown weather-seamed face that made him look like he’d spent decades trekking through the desert. And maybe he had. He’d served three hitches in the Moroccan army and one in the Peacekeepers.

Finally I figured I could get down to it, so I gave him my pitch and then waited a long uncomfortable minute, fighting back a sinking sense of futility. I couldn’t read any expression in his dark eyes, and my words sounded awkward and unconvincing, even to me.

“This is very interesting, Mr. Olmstead, but I do not think you will succeed,” he said finally in his formal, heavily accented English.

“With your support I can. I need everyone on the station.”

“To the contrary,” he pointed out. “You do not need me. I cannot carry out an execution without a legal witness.”

“We all have to stand together,” I said desperately, aware that we treated Kahlifa like an outcast. He didn’t owe us anything. “Look,” I tried, “This is an injustice. Surely you don’t want to see an innocent man die.”

He shrugged.

“Inshallah. God is just. If He wills, the boy will not die.”

“So it’s not our problem?!” I glared at him with open fury, but he just shrugged again.

“I’m sure the consortium appreciates your loyalty,” I told him bitterly, and started to get up.

“Mr. Olmstead, have you talked to Pajit?”

I stopped, suddenly speechless. Hell, I hadn’t even thought about it. And right now that kid was waiting to face his second execution.

Shit.

“I will,” I managed finally. I tried to think of something more to say but couldn’t.

Kahlifa had turned his attention back to the chess game, and he added in a mild, almost absent tone:

“I wonder who are you doing this for? A boy you do not know?

Or yourself?”

I felt a sudden violent urge to hit him, and just barely held my self control.

“I’m not the one who’s going to die!” I snapped, and strode out into the corridor, where I stood leaning against the bulkhead, shaking.

Jesus, I’d fucked that up. I’d said all the wrong things and then nearly assaulted another crew member. If I had, Geir would ship me down on the next shuttle.

And maybe he should, maybe I was cracking up. I’d seen guys come apart in the station before. Despite all the screenings, there’s always a few who can’t take it. But this was my fifth tour. I should be fine. I just needed more sleep. Adjusting to the station always takes a week or two. Then I’d be OK

I took lots of long deep breaths, then straightened up and headed for Solitary on

Level 2, my stomach churning queasily with guilt.

Kahlifa had been right, damn him. I had to talk to the kid.

At close range Pajit was a skinny mongrel, all eyes and elbows and sullen scowl, his brown face dominated by a bony nose and stained, crooked teeth. Scars and bruises underlay the dark stubble on his scalp. He huddled defensively on the bunk as I swung the door open. He hadn't been sleeping. He looked up at me like a trapped animal as I halted with my arms crossed, wishing there was a seat.

I knew his English wasn't good, so I kept it simple, explaining that we hoped to delay the execution until his pardon went through. He just glowered down at his hands.

"You understand?" I tried.

"Si."

"We're trying to keep you alive. Not killed," I said.

No response.

"Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Nyet."

"Well, it would mean something to me."

That got to him—I saw a flash of anger and he looked up.

"You be leaving this shithole. I be fucked in the ass."

"If you're pardoned, you leave," I said even as the sinking realization dawned that I hadn't thought this through.

"No squat don't leave."

He had a point. Montgolfier is a profit operation and shuttle payloads cost. I couldn't see anybody footing the bill for a squat, pardon or no pardon. I stood there speechless, feeling like the world's biggest asshole. I hadn't even thought about what would happen to the kid if he lived.

That's when I noticed that his finger nails were bitten back to the quick. I looked higher and saw him chewing his lip, looking just like Jimmy does when he's trying not to cry. Abruptly I thought: this boy is somebody's son.

"We'll find a way to get you down."

"Bullshit!" His voice cracked.

I leaned forward to pat his shoulder and he flinched violently.

Wrong move. I backed off, straightened, and put on my best Sergeant's voice.

"LISTEN UP, MISTER!"

Pajit was startled into glancing at me, mouth slightly agape.

"I'M giving you orders, and YOU'RE going to FOLLOW them!"

You have THREE orders."

I rapped one finger across my palm.

"ONE. You'll need a job. Decide what kind of job you want and what you need to get it." Pajit had pulled his mouth shut, but he seemed stunned. I don't imagine he'd had any experience with career counseling military style. I rapped two fingers on my palm.

"TWO. You need education. School. Reading and writing.

There are lessons on the net. I'll pay for the net time."

That, at least, I knew I could do.

"THREE. Exercise." I mimed weightlifting. "Up here you lose your muscles fast. You have to exercise. Now, you got that?"

He blinked.

"UNDERSTAND?" I bellowed.

"Yeah."

“OK,” I said. “Get to work.”

I kept up that false air of authority all the way back to my cabin, then I sat down on the bunk and put my head in my hands. I felt sick.

What in the hell had I just promised? I had no reason to believe that I could arrange any of it. Me and my goddamned mouth. Geir was going to erupt.

He did.

“You said WHAT?” His pixelated image stared incredulously from my screen. “That’s bullshit! There isn’t a country in the world that accepts squats. He isn’t even qualified for a UN refugee camp.”

“Maybe someone could sponsor him as an immigrant,” I suggested weakly.

“For Christsakes take on some gees, Mike! Look, the kid will find a nice big boyfriend and he’ll be OK. But you—you’re way out of line.

What in the hell was going through your head?!”

I was out of smart answers. I hunched forward and ran my hand miserably across my stubbly station cut. Finally I shrugged.

“I think I fucked up.”

Geir glared at me some more from the screen.

“Well, you damn well better fix it, Olmstead. You tell the kid you were wrong, and you do it now. He deserves that.”

The screen blanked. I was turning away when it flashed on again.

“And you’ve got twenty-four hours to call and book a psych appointment or I’m flagging you for a medical review. Don’t make me do it!”

The screen blanked again and stayed dark, and I stared at it, feeling wretched and furious. When I thought about facing Pajit again I wanted to puke. It would be like kicking one of those mangy little street dogs in Lima. Funny, I’d learned to shoot at armed children, but I never could get myself to shoot those dogs.

Well, I couldn't do it now. Not yet.

I stripped off, palmed the light panel, and pulled the sheet over me, but my mind raced in loops, trying to think of some way to get Pajit off the station. Then the flashbacks from Peru started, and when I shoved those down I found myself remembering the look I'd seen on Jimmy's face when he came home and found his Dad in bed crying at four in the afternoon. I finally dozed off for a few minutes and woke up tangled, sweaty and gasping, with the walls closing in around me.

The techs tell us that the air circulation on the Mount is fine, but most of us get the phobes anyway, and a few even jam doors open while they sleep. Suffocation is one of our two constant nightmares—the other is explosive decompression.

I hit the lights and sat up. I needed a drink.

Luckily Ben was still awake and he invited me to his cabin. When I got there, I peered around curiously. His walls were posterred with paintings and sculptures; famous ones probably. Clothes were tossed on the floor and the unmade bed. Ben still wore his standard issue jumpsuit, very rumpled and stretched tight across the stomach. He didn't seem any more drunk than earlier, but it was always hard to tell.

"About that drink..." I said.

He pulled open a drawer under his bunk and took out a plastic flask. I opened it and sniffed. It smelled like schnapps and industrial waste. I took a large burning swallow and passed it back. Ben lifted the flask ceremoniously.

"To the real Scottish mothers' milk, nectar of the gods, and may we taste it again soon," he intoned, then drank.

I sank into the drop seat, eyes watering, trying to suppress a cough but savoring the wonderful glow in my stomach that I'd pay like hell for in a few hours. I didn't care. I drank some more.

"To what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

"Pajit."

“Ah. Your campaign not going well?”

“If he doesn’t get death, he gets a lifetime in orbit for something he never did.”

“I take it you didn’t consider that?”

I shook my head, feeling stupid.

“And Geir...”

“Not his problem.” It came out more savagely than I had intended and I felt ashamed. I would have done the same in Geir’s shoes. I asked: “You know anything about immigration?”

Ben leaned back against the wall, and raised an eyebrow.

“Not a great deal, old man, but enough to tell you that his only hope would be a sponsorship and that is, to understate the case, unlikely. I don’t know about Canada, but E.U. sponsors have to guarantee financial support for ten years, and they’re liable for fines and legal penalties if he gets in any trouble. And the process, even by legal standards, is complicated, expensive, and time consuming. I can’t imagine that anyone would go through it, never mind for a squat they’d never met.”

I clenched the flask and winced, but forced the words out anyway.

“What if I did it? Could you help me?”

Ben stared at me.

“I do believe you’ve had too much, Mike. Or maybe not enough.”

I glared back at him. “What the hell else am I supposed to do, Ben? I started this whole damned thing and by God I have to finish it.”

“Mike, do you know exactly what sort of expense I’m talking about here?”

I shook my head miserably, and got a slight dizzy sensation from the Coriolis force. The alcohol on an empty stomach was hitting me hard. Then Ben gave me a cost estimate and I got really dizzy.

“Do you have that much?”

“Hell, no,” I said, fighting down panic. “But I can find it. I’ve been broke before.” But not at my age, with a mother and son to support. And I couldn’t expect them to understand, especially Jimmy.

I drained the flask.

“The formware sometimes takes years.”

“Years?!”

“Fraid so.” Ben studied me for a little while, then said quietly: “Drop it, Mike.”

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. Look, consider this. For the first time in Pajit’s life he’s got enough food, clothes, meds and even net access. He won’t get maimed in a cargo carrier or pick up any of the nasty viruses running through the squats. Ironical, isn’t it? We bring the masterminds of human atrocity to our hotel, while their victims die in the dirt.”

I didn’t bother answering. I’d heard it before.

“So why are you doing this Mike? Surely you Canucks aren’t really that Nice?”

It must have been the booze that made me try to answer.

“Ben, it’s.... You don’t have any kids, do you?”

“I have two.”

“Yeah?” I was startled. He had no pics of family—never mentioned any. “Then maybe you know about how kids... well, change you.”

“I doubt it,” he said icily. “As my ex-wife would be happy to inform you, I am a callous son of a bitch, a vicious bastard, and a miserable failure. I like to think it gives me something in common with my clients.”

The tone of Ben’s voice chilled me. Under his contrived good humor was an edge of anger so intense that I found myself leaning away from him.

“You’re a good lawyer,” I said awkwardly.

He snorted.

“I’ll let you in on a secret, Mike. I’m not that good. And I don’t actually care about these pathetic sods.”

He must have seen something in my face and realized that he’d gone too far. Abruptly he changed the subject.

“Look, I’ll give you the name of a good immigration lawyer, but for what it’s worth, I think it’s lunacy. Leave the poor bastard alone.”

I think it was his mocking tone that sparked my temper. I stood abruptly, spitting words at him.

“You know what I hate, Ben—it’s the way you sit around and play the Great Cynic. Nothing’s worth trying, nothing’s worth doing, nothing will work. And you snipe at anybody who tries. You and your fucking sophistication, and your cynical horseshit!”

I threw the flask against the wall. It bounced and rebounded, narrowly missing me. I saw Ben flinch, but his face had gone quite blank.

“Well, I’m going to go out and do something stupid, and when I fail you can sit there all smug, laughing because you were right. But at least I’ll be able to look myself in the mirror. I’ll be someone my kid can be proud of. And you’ll still be drunk and miserable and alone.”

At eighteen hundred hours I staggered on duty with a crashing hangover. I took a spell at the monitors—a real snore job where we watch a bank of flatscreens scanning randomly through all the prison levels of the station, trying to catch something that computer surveillance would miss—but I couldn’t concentrate at all. I tried drinking coffee, then had to run out and puke it up.

When I got back, Themba came to talk to me. He’s southern African, very black, with an infectious white-toothed grin. But he wasn’t smiling this time.

“Mike, you sick?”

“Went drinking with Ben. Guess I’m out of practice.”

“Ah.” There was relief in Themba’s eyes. That was a better reason for my shakes than the one he’d been thinking of. His habitual grin reappeared. “I think maybe you go back to bed, get up later. We cover for you, no sweat.”

It was a good offer, but I fought down a burning flash of humiliation. I’d never sicked out on my watch before. I couldn’t trust my voice, so I nodded, then got up and left, not looking at the others, but feeling their eyes on my back.

On the way to my quarters I passed Sickbay, and on a sudden impulse I went in. The gurney stood in the middle of the room, sheets folded neatly on top, with the IV tree beside it. It looked completely benign, except for the restraints bolted to the metal frame of the gurney. I found myself staring at them. Thinking about that kid’s skinny wrists.

But I had a son already and responsibilities. If I lost my job, his future might go with it. I owed Jimmy. And I owed him to be a good father, to do the right thing. I looked at my hands. I couldn’t hold them steady.

I turned around and went to the mess. Geir was there eating dinner. I asked him to meet me in the office, then I waited until the door closed behind us.

“Book me down,” I said.

He looked at me a long time. Angry. Disappointed.

“You sure?”

“Like you said, you can’t afford the PT’s. Station’s short enough on crew already.”

There was a long pause, then he cleared his throat.

“OK. Next shuttle is at oh five twenty. I’ll check the payload and see if I can get you on. No baggage, though.”

“Right,” I said. I swallowed. “Uh, look, just as a favor, don’t let on that I’m

shipping out, OK? I'd like the guys to find out after I'm gone."

He nodded shortly.

"I'll do what I can."

Back in my quarters I fought down waves of nausea and then panic. I wanted to call Geir back, tell him to cancel the shuttle, I'd stay. Hell, Toronto was full of guys like me sleeping twelve-to-a-room in welfare shelters. But I'd committed myself now. I had to see it through.

There was no point trying to sleep, so I plugged into entertainment vids. I don't remember any of them. I thought about calling home, but calls were expensive and they wouldn't change anything. I'd face my family later.

Just before oh four hundred, I went down to the mess and caught Themba on his break. He was alone like I'd hoped for—usually he took his break with me. I told him I was feeling better and I'd help him load the shuttle. He looked so pleased and relieved that I felt like an utter shit as I fetched a coffee for him and carefully slipped a knockout into it.

I wasn't sure what would happen, but we just talked for a bit, then he got a strange look on his face, lay his head down on the table and started snoring. I jumped up and checked the corridor, then grabbed Themba under his shoulders and dragged his slumped body, grateful for the slight advantage of low grav. It couldn't have taken more than fifteen or twenty seconds to haul him to the nearest empty cube, but it seemed longer, especially the last part where his heels caught on the lip of the pressure door. I finished by taking his dog tags.

My next stop was the deserted backup command center, where I plugged my dogtags into the command panel and logged on with my passcode. New guys often expect retinal scans or voice recognition, but our antiques work okay. My palms were sweaty and my stomach knotted with tension. Everything I'd planned would be impossible if Geir had already canceled my supervisor passcode.

The panel chimed and I caught my breath with relief. I entered a series of special overrides. They'd be automatically canceled at the start of the next watch, but my plan shouldn't take that long.

Next I let myself into the security sector on Level Two using Themba's dogtags. Pajit was awake in the solitary cell, watching the plexiglass-armored screen on the wall. English lessons. Somehow I felt immensely relieved. Maybe there was hope for him. When I ordered him into wrist restraints he looked frightened, though he tried to hide it behind a scowl. Fortunately he didn't ask questions. I didn't have time to explain.

My overrides worked. Pajit's implant alarm failed to go off when we left Solitary. But that was the last thing that went according to plan.

The crew locker room should have been empty, but when I walked in herding Pajit in front of me there was somebody standing with his back turned. I froze, swearing silently to myself. I didn't have a "Plan B." Before I could back up, he turned around. It was Kahlifa.

He frowned at Pajit and then me, and I heard my heart pounding in my ears.

"This is a secure area."

"I'm taking him to the shuttle bay," I said gruffly, trying to keep my face blank. "His pardon came through. He's going back."

It was a stupid lie but the only one I could think of. I marched Pajit towards my locker and pulled it open, hoping desperately Kahlifa would leave. I pulled out my environment suit and turned to see him standing with crossed arms, watching.

For a second I considered trying to jump Kahlifa, but he was ready and I wasn't sure I could take him, anyway. So I gambled.

"Don't just stand there! Help me suit him up."

To my complete surprise, Kahlifa grinned. It made him look entirely different— younger. He walked over and grabbed my suit, nodding at Pajit's wrist restraints. "Take those off."

I pulled my mouth shut and unlocked them, astounded but grateful for the help. I needed it. The suit was far too large for Pajit and he was clumsy with inexperience. We struggled to get him into it, then I grabbed Themba's suit out of his locker. It was loose in the shoulders and tight in the feet, but otherwise not

too bad a fit. I could have saved more time by skipping the safety check, but the habit's too ingrained. I ran through it, then slipped off the helmet and left it hanging down my back. Kahlifa had done Pajit's check and was waiting for me, holding the kid's arm. I couldn't resist.

"So what happened to 'Inshallah'?" I asked.

Kahlifa shrugged.

"Who am I to say that you are not the hand of Allah?"

I was still trying to get my head around that one as I herded Pajit to the elevator and punched through the security procedure for the trip up-spoke to the station's hub. I told Pajit not to say or do anything, then I turned off his mike and secured his helmet. With reflected lights it was hard to see his face, and there was no mistaking the big orange "OLMSTEAD" stamped on the suit. Still, he wasn't much of an impostor. As we rose up-spoke, with the weird sensation of sliding into the spinward elevator wall and lifting off the floor, the suit stretched up on the kid until he could barely peer over the bottom edge of the face plate. Well, there was nothing I could do about it.

The thump of the elevator doors echoed loudly against bare metal walls, girders, and pipes in the cargo bay. I had Pajit grab my shoulder and went hand-over-hand along a zero-gee guide cable to a dim corner behind some cargo nets where I anchored him next to a sign reading "Mass Matters! WATCH YOUR FINGERS!" He looked nauseous. I hoped he wasn't going to puke in my suit and then kicked myself. If this worked, I wouldn't see that suit again.

I logged into the manifest for loading instructions. It's usually a two-man job, so it was a good thing the load had been trimmed, and even better that the shuttle was running five minutes late. I was just barely ready when the first klaxon went off at our antique hatch—a relic from the years before standardized docking equipment. I closed my helmet, as per regs, and then went through the docking check-list while trying not to look back towards the elevator doors. Surely somebody was onto me by now.

But no alarms went off. I finished the final pressure checks and the hatch swung wide with a slight hiss. All lights green. I flipped up my helmet and attempted not to look appalled as it occurred to me that I might know one of the pilots. What if they recognized me?

Hell, what if anybody noticed I was wearing a suit labeled “MBUNDU”?

When the co-pilot floated out I thanked the gods at least that I’d never seen her before. She wrinkled her nose at the station air, which smells exactly like two hundred guys have been living in it for ten years. She scowled.

“What’s with this unscheduled crew transfer?” she demanded.

“He’s got the phobes.”

“Then they shouldn’t of sent him up!”

I shrugged and my shoulders clunked around in Themba’s suit.

The pilot looked around.

“Well, where the hell is he?”

“I’ll get him. He’s tranked to the eyeballs.”

When I reached Pajit, I caught a glimpse of his frightened face so I mimed at him to close his eyes, pretend to be asleep. Then I launched him gently at the ZG scale. A laser flashed just before he hit the pad, then the read-out showed velocity/impact results. Pajit, suit and all, massed less than sixty kilos. I felt a rush of apprehension. He was much too small for a crewman.

The pilot turned from the scale and looked piercingly at me.

“You tell your CO that if there’s any more of this last minute screwing around with our payload, we’re filing a formal complaint. It isn’t just a goddamned nuisance, it’s a safety hazard.”

I nodded numbly.

It took about fifteen minutes to unload supplies from the shuttle and re-load it with packs of meds, monofilament and scientific glassware, then there was an agonizing delay while the pilots struggled and swore at the folding emergency seat and I watched with adrenaline pounding in my veins.

When the docking hatch finally thumped shut, I could barely believe it. I hung

there stupidly in the empty bay, trying to feel some kind of triumph, but not succeeding. There went my job and maybe a lot more. The consortium could file criminal charges. Damn, I didn't want to think about that. Suddenly it seemed less important that Pajit was somebody's son. That my son spent a year at a time in Toronto without me and I hoped to God that if he got in trouble some stranger would look out for him.

Two guys from Geir's watch turned up then looking for me, and I felt my mood get heavier along with the gravity as we sank back to Level 1. In the office Geir was making calls. He ignored me, so I slumped wearily in the chair and listened. Kagoshima spaceport was furious. HQ was incensed. Newsers had just picked up the "escape"

story and they were overjoyed.

The door buzzed and Sam stuck his head in.

"Geir? Themba's awake. Medic says he's fine."

Geir grunted. Sam hesitated and gave me a look burning with curiosity. Behind him I caught a glimpse of other guys peering in. I looked away. Sam backed out.

The com chirruped with a coded priority call from the Consortium's Director of Operations. She sounded mad as hell.

"I very much hope that the rumors of an escape from Montgolfier are unfounded, Mr. Eldjarnsson."

"There's been no escape, ma'am. Just an... expedited early release."

I couldn't see the Director's face from where I sat, but her tone of voice was ominous.

"Release?! And whose initiative was this?"

A heartbeat's pause, then Geir said:

"Mine."

"You've exceeded your authority."

“Ma’am, I believe that if you check all the records very carefully you might discover that my orders came from the Board of Directors.

Yesterday.”

My jaw dropped as I realized that Geir was asking the Director to bail him out.

“This sounds remarkably like blackmail.”

“No, ma’am. Absolutely not.” said Geir grimly. “It’s simply the best answer I can come up with under the circumstances.”

Another pause.

“I’ll call you back.”

The link went dead. Geir let out a gusty breath, leaned back and then spoke to me for the first time.

“Olmstead, as God is my witness, if they don’t kill you, I’m going to string you up myself.”

I was staring at him incredulously. “You didn’t have to do that!”

He opened his eyes to glare at me.

“Let me get this straight. Are you telling me not to do something blind stupid just because I happen to think it’s right?”

“Uh....”

The door buzzed again.

“I thought someone here might require the services of a lawyer,”

came Ben’s sardonic voice.

I stood, feeling my face go hot.

“I owe you an apology...” I started.

Ben interrupted me.

“No need, old man. Must have been the hooch.”

His smile didn't quite make it to his eyes, and his tone was a little too hearty. I offered him my chair but he shook his head and leaned against the wall. Geir filled him in.

“What do you think they'll do?” he asked finally.

“If you're lucky, nothing. The Consortium is very anxious to avoid any suggestion of mishap on their penitential flagship.

Prosecuting the station commander or even a...” Ben gave me a sour glance, “... crusading Canadian would be difficult to explain. But you'll have to ensure that everybody up here tells the same story and nobody talks to newsmen. They'll be calling with offers if they haven't already.”

“I cut non-priority communications forty minutes ago,” said Geir, with a trace of satisfaction.

I wasn't thinking very straight. It took me a minute to add it up and realize that I'd been suiting Pajit up forty minutes ago. Geir had known. I found myself staring at him, feeling the first impossible glow of rising hope.

“What happens to Pajit now?” I asked, trying to keep my voice level.

“Kagoshima Security will probably send him to the nearest UN camp.”

“I'll talk to immigration....” I began, but Ben interrupted.

“There's another option.” I turned in surprise. Ben didn't look at me. He spoke to Geir. “I pulled some strings. If Pajit can pass an English proficiency exam, I believe I can arrange a European student visa. After that it's up to him.”

He turned for the door, but I jumped in front of him and held out my hand.

“I'm sorry for what I said. Really. But thanks for making me so mad.” I managed

a grin.

Ben hesitated, then took my hand reluctantly.

“Apology accepted,” he said gruffly.

I took my foot away from the door. He started to open it, then looked back at me and added in a slightly husky voice, “I believe your son will be very proud.”

Geir shuffled things on his desk until I could pull myself together, then told me that until he heard from dirtside I was on suspension and med review. It sounded wonderful.

When I pulled the door open I was glad I’d wiped my face because the corridor was crowded with guys, all trying to look as if they just happened to be standing there. I could hear air recirc fans (Soyuz, discontinued 1989) whining under the unusual load. Themba was up front.

“Uh, look I’m sorry...” I started, but he interrupted me.

“What has happened?”

I held up crossed fingers and then broke into a grin.

“Geir backed me up.”

Someone cheered, then guys started slapping me on the back.

Themba drummed the wall with his hands, making an eerie reverberation through the corridor. It was the most excitement I could ever remember seeing on the Mount.

I caught sight of Kahlifa leaning against the wall a little distance from the rest, and I walked over. I spoke deliberately loudly “Buy you a coffee?”

He hesitated, giving me one of those inscrutable looks.

“No, don’t tell me,” I said. “Inshallah. Right?”

His face split into a big smile.

“Allah is merciful. I take four sugars.”

ORGANIC GEOMETRY

Andrew Ferguson

Andrew Ferguson is a UK based writer whose work has appeared in various magazines including Interzone. The present story, in a slightly different form, was first published in SportySpec anthology.

This is a lovely short story and is unique in a way. How many SF stories have you seen that deal with cricket? Personally – with the exception of this story – I have seen none.

The exact physical properties that make a cricket ball swing when it leaves a fast bowler's hand have never been fully explained. Like the flight of the bumblebee, or a baseball pitcher's curve ball, the evidence is open to interpretation.

Mumtaz Mohammed's brief Test career took speculation to another plane entirely.

Wisden, the Cricketing bible, described Mumtaz at the end of his first international season:

'His approach to the point of delivery is not so much a run up as a kind of serene dance. At the wicket itself there is an explosive whirl of arms and legs, long black hair and flashing teeth, from which the ball emerges. Although not much above fast-medium, Mohammed surprises batsmen with prodigious sideways movement.'

Wisden didn't report the tales Mumtaz's victims whispered to each other, late in the bar after the game. The most common story was of seeing a swaying cobra, half way down the pitch, as the ball left his hand.

Wisden did note that Mumtaz's family had emigrated to Pakistan from Afghanistan when he was twelve, saying:

‘Mohammed learnt his cricket in the foothills. Playing on whatever flat piece of ground there was, overlooked by the cloud-covered mountains and the village elders, he and his teammates played a game imposed by the British Empire but adopted with near-religious fervor in that remote region of the sub-continent.’

The purple prose was inspired by Mumtaz’s international debut, against England at Lord’s. He bowled out the entire English team in both innings, a feat unrivalled in international cricket before then.

The replays showed a cricket ball apparently defying the laws of physics, swinging first towards the batsmen, then away again. When asked how he did it, Mumtaz would simply smile, and shrug.

With Mumtaz in the side, Pakistan became the team to beat in world cricket. His teammates, inspired by his example, pulled together and topped the international averages.

On tour in India, a rumor started that Mumtaz got the ball to behave unpredictably by rubbing hair oil into it. The hair oil manufacturer met Mumtaz in Delhi, and offered him a million US

dollars for one advert.

‘But why would I take money to tell a lie?’ Mumtaz asked him, smiling as always.

‘Because it’s a lie only you and I know about,’ the businessman said, checking no one else was in earshot.

‘But Allah hears everything,’ Mumtaz said. ‘And I’m here to do his will, not yours.’

The next day Mumtaz appeared from the dressing room shaven headed. Taking the new ball, he dismissed all ten Indian batsmen in the space of nine overs. Even his critics had to admit that, however he did it, it wasn’t with hair oil.

Other organizations were also keen to use Mumtaz’s name.

Afghan and Pakistani Islamic sects made much of his religious beliefs – until, that is, someone pointed out his family belonged to a branch of the religion that,

like most of Islam, abhorred violence. In fact, his sect regarded the ending of all violence as the surest way of entering paradise.

Shortly after Pakistan beat Australia at home, Mumtaz brought out his autobiography, *Outward Journey*. It was a disappointment to many. Matches were described in obsessive detail, with weather, field placings and tactical decisions receiving pride of place. There was little about his bowling, and nothing about swing.

Mumtaz wrote in the Introduction:

‘Cricket is sometimes described as ‘chess on grass.’ In truth it is closer to a form of organic geometry which, when mastered, can lead to mastery of greater things. The will of batsman, bowler and fielders are simply vectors in a much more complex equation.’

At the end of his third season, Mumtaz announced his retirement from all levels of cricket and retreated, still smiling, back over the border to Afghanistan. ‘My outward journey is completed,’ he told the Pakistani Prime Minister. In his absence, his teammates fell out with each other again.

A month or so later, some Afghan insurgents were under heavy bombardment from Government forces. Things looked desperate for the rebels. They were trapped on a ridge with little natural cover.

Heat-seeking missiles began to fall on them like infidel rain.

Then, to their amazement, the US-made weaponry began to miss them by a huge margin, exploding harmlessly away from the rebel camp. The rebels stood on the ridge, waving their AK47s in defiance.

Then they discovered their own rocket launchers were just as incapable of hitting any target they aimed at.

The two forces stared at each other across the artillery-pitted valley, nonplussed. The era of Organic Geometry had begun.

SYNCHRONICITY

Ahmed A. Khan

This story, in a slightly different form, was first published in Vulgata, November 2006. It was subsequently revised and re-edited before being included here. I have absolutely no qualms about modesty in stating that I am immensely proud of having written it. When this story was first published, one of the readers of Vulgata wrote to me saying that he found this story one of the most life affirming stories he had ever read. I hope the present readers find it so, too.

Dawn

Anil Kapadia, thirty-three, part time writer and full time computer consultant, sat eating his breakfast, then picked up his glass of water and poured it over his head. Shocked at his own action, he started laughing.

This was the start of an interesting chain of causes and effects.

The day had started with Anil opening his eyes to a beautiful Saturday morning in the midst of August. His mind still clouded with sleep, he tried to snuggle up to his wife and remembered that his wife had gone to stay with her parents after a fight with him last week.

They had fought over something silly, so silly that he had already forgotten what the bone of contention was. Anil had a sneaking suspicion that in that fight, he had been the one who was more in the wrong. So the first emotion that he felt that morning was a twinge of guilt. But then the world intruded upon his senses.

The window drapes had lighted up. He went to the window and pulled them back. The light fell on his young but slightly haggard face. He opened the window. Cool breeze played around his face while he, with his fingers, tried unsuccessfully to brush his unruly hair into some semblance of order.

An ancient book had described dawn thus: By the first ray of rising sun, the world is stirred. Shining gold is sprinkled on smiling flowers. The fragrant air is filled with sweet melodies of singing birds.

Well, this morning was not wholly as described in the ancient book. The fragrance of the air was a teeny bit diluted by the smell of garbage and car fumes. The sounds of moving cars and shouting juvenile delinquents sometimes overwhelmed the sweet melodies of singing birds. Yet it was a good enough morning all in all, except for the fact that his loneliness of the moment depressed him.

His apartment was on the third floor of a high-rise building. His window overlooked a tree-lined street that was moderately busy in the day but almost totally deserted during the night. On his side of the street was a row of apartment buildings. On the other side of the street was a huge shopping plaza.

He stood at the window for some time, watching the traffic on the street below. Then he turned and walked to the bathroom. It was while he was in the shower and warm water sprayed over every pore of his body that a strange kind of self-awareness hit him. He felt as if his soul had split in two: an observer and the observed. He watched himself taking the shower and thought: "What am I doing here?"

The "here" in his thought didn't stand for the shower, nor did it stand for his apartment. It had nothing to do with his present time and place as in "here and now". The "here" in this particular thought stood for the world, the universe, his whole existence.

Strangeness followed strangeness. He had a premonition, an expectation. Something significant was going to happen to him that day. But what? He had no clue whatsoever.

The feeling of expectation was still there while he busied himself with the preparation of breakfast. He picked up two slices of bread.

Popped them in the toaster. Opened the fridge and took out the packet of butter. The slices popped out of toaster, burned black. He threw the slices in trashcan. Picked up two more slices. Popped them in the toaster. Adjusted the toaster to the correct temperature. The slices popped out, well done this time. He put them in a plate. Applied butter. Carried the plate to the table. Flopped down on the

chair. At last the ordeal was over and his breakfast was ready.

He thought wistfully of his wife.

At about the same time, a few miles away from Anil's place, at the house of his in-laws, his wife Jasmine was thinking about him wistfully. I wonder how he is managing without me, she mused. The housework must have reduced the poor guy to jitters. It has now been nearly a week and he has not come to woo me back. The fight had been his mistake. He should apologise to me and make it up to me and may be, just may be, I will forgive him this time. But then, what was it that Erich Segal had written in "Love Story"? "Love means not having to sorry", or something like that, wasn't it?

And furthermore, how could he come here? Her parents had moved to this new house just last week and Anil didn't know the address. But then he did know the telephone number here. He could have at least called, the jerk.

Flames

Anil remembered that last night, before going to sleep, he had mentally made a list of things that he had to do the next day. But somehow, in the light of the day, he seemed to have forgotten everything that had been on his mind the night before. All he remembered was a dream. He had dreamt that he had gone to the house of his in-laws with the intention of making up with his wife. He had reached the house, parked his car in front of the house, gone up the driveway and pushed the bell. His wife had opened the door.

"What took you so long?" she had said and moved into his arms. And it had felt so good. And he had woken up.

He picked up a pen and a paper and tried to jot down the things he had to do that day. Nothing in the way of pending actions came to his mind. Instead, what did come to mind was a philosophical statement from Bhagvad Gita.

"Only actions done in God bind not the soul of man."

And he felt the weight of the fetters on his soul and the weight oppressed him.

He remembered the flame sermon of Buddha.

“Everything, O people, is aflame. And how, O people, is everything aflame? I declare unto you that it is aflame with the fire of lust, with the fire of anger, with the fire of ignorance. It is aflame with the anxieties of birth, decay, death, grief, suffering, dejection and despair.

“The eye is aflame, visible objects are aflame.

“The ear is aflame, sounds are aflame.

“The nose is aflame, odours are aflame.

“The tongue is aflame, tastes are aflame.

“The body is aflame, objects of contact are aflame.

“The mind is aflame, thoughts are aflame.”

How do you quench the flames? He thought. With water, of course. It all seemed so logical at that time. He simply picked up a glass of water from the dining table and poured it over his head.

While his mind had been waxing philosophical, there had been a knock on the door, but he had been too absorbed in his thoughts to hear it. It was his next door neighbour, Tony Wilson. Tony and Anil were close to each other, so when he knocked and Anil didn't open his door, he tried the handle and finding it unlocked, simply opened the door and walked in, right at the moment when Anil, his back to the door, was pouring water over his head. He watched this sight with eyes agog, then tiptoed out, slowly closing the door behind him.

An extremely worried Tony returned to his apartment. Something was seriously wrong with Anil. The estrangement from his wife seemed to have unhinged him slightly. What should he do? What was his duty as Anil's friend? He thought of their mutual friend, Dr. Ali.

Yes, he was the right person to call for help. Tony picked up the telephone and dialled Ali's number.

Premonition

Anil laughed at himself for his silly action, got up and changed his dress and sat

down at his computer. First, he surfed the Net for latest news. There was a lot of it: murder, war, politics, promiscuity.

Anil, who was feeling depressed already, felt even more depressed. He quickly got off the news page and opened up his email account. Immediately, he was hit with the dilemma he had been facing the previous day.

At his place of work, by sheer accident he had uncovered the fact that his boss was dealing in drugs. His nature screamed at him to have this fact exposed to the world. He had a journalist friend and one email to this friend would be enough to open this can of worms. But he was afraid – afraid of losing his job, afraid even of his life. What if his boss had gangster connection and had him killed or beaten or maimed? And he hated himself for being afraid.

He shut off his browser and opened up the word processor, wanting to work on his novel. This book he was writing was overtly idealistic. It spoke of morals, ethics, values. It even talked of God.

No one is going to publish it, he thought. Why am I writing?

He was about to shut off the computer in disgust when Bhagvad Gita once again came to his aid.

“You have the right to works, not to their fruits. They are surely to be pitied who hanker after the fruit of every action. May failure or success be one to you. Even an iota of righteousness in your actions shall deliver you from cosmic fear. Plunge into action and leave the result to God. The wise who merge their intellect in Him are freed forever from the bondage of birth.”

He picked up his writing where he had left it. He was still in the early chapters of his book. At that particular moment, he was at the point of describing the interior of the apartment of his hero. Now, how do I want the guy's apartment to look like? Take from life. Why don't I put down the description of my own apartment?

He cast a look around and started to write.

It was a two-bedroom apartment. The walls were white. The floor was covered with a blue carpet.

In the master bedroom, the double bed lay snug against the wall opposite the window, covered with skyblue curtains and golden drapes. The window opened to the east and in the morning, sometimes when he got up before his wife, he would draw the curtains aside, and sunlight would fall directly on the bed, lighting up the rumpled comfortably slept-in sheets, and the painfully beautiful sight of his sleeping wife, her dark hair spread on her pillow in soft curls. The second bedroom awaited the coming of his progeny to be put to its proper use. Currently, the spare bedroom was used as a study and shelves full of books lined most of its walls.

Anil stopped typing. The premonition, the expectancy of something significant in the air, returned with renewed vigour.

Be aware, he commanded himself. Aware of self and surroundings. Aware of the texture of your clothes on your body.

Aware of the feel of the patterns that the sunlight seeping through the windows created on the furniture and fixtures of the room. Aware of the indescribable taste of cool clear water as it passed through the lips, over the tongue and into the gullet. Aware of the smells all around. Aware of the dim sounds from the street below.

Be aware. Aware of what you are. Aware of your position in the universe. Aware of the motivators of your actions. Aware of what was right and what was not.

The telephone rang. Anil picked it up. It was his mother and she sounded worried.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Your father,” she sobbed.

“What happened?” he almost shouted.

“He is being operated today.”

“Operated? What for?”

“Appendicitis.”

“What time is the operation?”

“At two.”

“I will be there, Mom. Don’t worry. Everything will be all right.”

He put down the phone and sat there for quite a while, not moving, his heart palpitating with worry.

“Mom. Dad.” He spoke softly, imagining they were right there in front him, not old as they were at present but young and lively as they had been when he was a child.

Wish Mom and Dad had agreed to come and live with me, he thought. He had asked them, pleaded with them many a times, but every time they had refused. Every time the answer was the same.

“This is the place we grew up. All our memories are here. There is a part of us in each nook and cranny of this house, each alley, each street here.”

“Then I will come and live with you and find a job somewhere near you.” He had said.

“No. No need to sacrifice your excellent job for us. You worry needlessly. We will be fine here. And of course you will be visiting us every now and then during the weekends.”

He didn’t remember who had said the above words. Was it his father or his mother? It didn’t matter. They spoke with one tongue.

Will our love for each other - my wife’s and mine - be as strong in our old age?

My wife. I will call her right now. This illness of my father is the right pretext. Our quarrel will be forgotten. She will come to me. She loves my parents.

He was about to pick up the receiver and dial the number of his in-laws when the door opened and Dr. Ali walked in.

Detour

Dr. Ali was a strange character. Highly intelligent, sharp witted, incisive, an expert neurologist. And he was an idealist of the first order. It was this idealism that had made Anil see a kindred soul in Dr. Ali. They had hit it off extremely well right from their first meeting which had taken place when Anil had gone to consult him about a minor neurological problem that he was having.

Ali was one of those doctors, quite rare these days, who take their Hippocratic oath quite seriously. He was from a poor family. His parents suffered great hardships to give their son an opportunity to succeed in the world..

Anil was surprised to see Ali.

“Hey, Doc.” He smiled with genuine pleasure.

There was no answering smile from Ali. Instead, he looked at Anil steadily.

“What are you staring at me for?”

“Are you feeling well, Anil?” There was extreme concern and worry in Ali’s voice.

“Feeling well? Of course, I am feeling well. At least I was until you walked in.”

“Sure?”

“What is this?” Anil was alarmed.

Ali ignored his question.

“Won’t you ask me to sit and offer me something to eat?”

“Do I have to ask you? My house is yours, dear friend, as the spider said to the fly.” Anil laughed. “But then, you can hardly find something decent to eat in this house right now, with Jasmine away.”

Ali sat down on the sofa. “Speaking of Jasmine, haven’t you patched up your quarrel with her till now?”

“N-no, not yet, but ... Oh! By the way, you will have to excuse me for a moment. I have to make a phone call to my travel agent.”

“Travel agent? What for?”

“I am taking the noon flight to visit my parents.”

“All of a sudden?”

“Yeah! I Just got a call from Mom. Dad’s going to have his appendix removed.”

“Oh!”

Anil went to make his phone call. Ali sat there, thinking hard.

First, the problem with his wife. And now this. His father’s surgery. A second big blow. Enough to unhinge a sensitive person.

Ali got up abruptly and disconnected the phone. Anil looked at him with surprise.

“Why’d you do that? I had not completed my travel arrangements.”

“I cannot allow you to travel at this moment.”

“What?”

“I think you are about to have a nervous breakdown, and I want to take you to my hospital for a check up.”

“A nervous breakdown? Nonsense. What gave you that idea?”

“Tell you later, but you have to come with me.”

“But I cannot. I have to take the noon flight. Dad’s operation is at two. I want to be there before the operation.”

“Look. There is another flight out at about two. I will finish your check up in time for you to catch that flight. You will be there while the operation is going on. That is the best I can do.”

“Damn you, okay I will come with you to your blasted hospital,”

Anil shouted, raw anger in his voice.

Martyrdom

The day was bright. Overhead, the sky was clear. Traffic moved on the road at an even pace. Anil sat in Ali's car, brooding, oblivious to the pleasant weather outside even as he subconsciously registered the first indications of the oncoming fall. Parts of the tree-lined sidewalks were covered by a crinkly carpet of gold and red leaves.

As their car turned from the main road into a side street, they saw a procession going by. The people were all wearing black and they were carrying banners. Two words were prominent on the banners: "Hussain" and "Karbala".

Anil stopped brooding and looked at the procession with interest.

"These are your people, aren't they? Muslims?"

"Yes," Ali nodded.

"What kind of procession is this?"

"It is a procession to mourn and commemorate the martyrdom of Hussain ibn Ali."

"And who is – or was – Hussain ibn Ali?"

"He was the grandson of Mohammed, the Messenger of Allah.

He was martyred fighting for the right against overwhelming odds in a place called Karbala in Iraq, fourteen centuries ago on the tenth of the Islamic month of Muharram. Today is that date. The Muslims commemorate this day every year to keep alive the ideals of Hussain that teach never to bow down before tyranny."

"Tell me more about Hussain." The writer in Anil was intrigued.

"A tyrant by the name of Yazid ibn Muawiya had declared himself ruler of Muslims. He demanded allegiance from Hussain because allegiance from the grandson of the Prophet would legitimize all Yazid's oppressions and debauchery. Hussain refused. A fight ensued."

"Oh, so it was a fight for power."

“No. Hussain made sure that no unbiased historian could ever label the battle of Karbala as a fight for power or kingdom. He did not take any army with them. Instead, he took a group of about a hundred people, including his family and close companions. To them he declared that he was going to his death. It is better to die an honourable death, he said, than live under oppression. He said it was his fight and urged them not to accompany him but they refused to leave him.”

“So what happened?”

“Well, in Karbala, besides the banks of the river Euphrates, Hussain and his companions faced Yazid’s army. The least head count given in books for Yazid’s army in Karbala is thirty thousand. These thirty thousand soldiers blocked Hussain and his family and friends, including small children, from the waters of Euphrates. For three days, people in Hussain’s camp went thirsty. This was a tactic to pressurize Hussain in accepting Yazid’s rule. Well, the tactic failed. A fight ensued. Hussain and his followers were martyred and members of his family, including women and children were made prisoners. But since then, this sacrifice has become a beacon of inspiration for free thinkers all over the world.

“A poet, in a couplet, said it well: Hussain, you lost your life and your family, but you made it possible for us never to fear an oppressor.”

There was silence in the car until they reached the hospital.

Hospital

Their car stopped at the hospital. Anil followed Ali into the hospital. In the lobby, two old ladies, obviously patients, seemed to be having a reunion. They saw each other. Their eyes lit up. They moved towards each other, arms outstretched. They embraced, the wrinkles on their faces surrounding their smiles like illuminations found on the margins of old and antique books. Even in his troubled state, the writer in Anil couldn’t help noticing this scene and filing it for future use in his novel.

Anil was put through a number of tests. There were neurological tests, physical tests, neurophysical tests and what-not. His reflexes were tested. His IQ was tested.

Noon came and went.

In between the tests, Anil shouted for Ali.

“What’s it?” Ali asked.

“I want to call Mom.”

On the phone, he said: “Mom, I am afraid I cannot catch today’s flight.”

“It’s okay, Baba” she replied. “In fact, there is no need for you to come. It is a minor operation. Nothing to worry about,” she consoled Anil but her voice betrayed her worry.

“I’ll be there first thing tomorrow, Mom,” he said and put down the phone.

After a battery of tests, it was time for lunch. During lunch, he asked Ali, “Now tell me what is this all about? Why all these tests?”

“We felt that you had been under a great tension the past few days.”

“We?”

“Tony and I.”

“Oh Tony! Where does he come into the story?”

“He saw you doing something nonsensical.”

“Like what?”

“Like pouring a glass of water over your head.”

“Oh my God!”

After lunch there were a few more tests. After the completion of other tests, he was even subjected to a session of psychoanalysis.

Somehow, he found the session with the psychoanalyst quite rewarding. The psychoanalyst asked several questions. Questions like: How was your childhood?

Tell us about your friends.

Do you love your wife?

What is your goal in life? What do you want to get out of life?

He gave one line responses to these questions but the backdrop that his mind supplied to each of his responses was detailed and complex, thus:

Childhood

My childhood? What do I remember about my childhood? Quite a lot, in fact. The reason probably is that the child I was is still a part of me.

A sprawling, yellow old-fashioned house with tiled roofs was where I lived. The house sported a garden. There were numerous fruits and flowers in the garden. In the midst of the garden there was a small water pond around which lilies grew.

Paddy fields - no, they didn't belong to us - stretched for several acres in front of our house. To reach the fields, all you had to do was to cross the road. This road led to the railway station which was about two minutes walk from our house. Sitting in the house, we could hear the sounds of the coming and going trains. The railway tracks passed through the paddy fields. I enjoyed seeing the trains passing through the green fields.

A part of my day was spent in school. The rest was spent in various things: doing my homework, playing, climbing trees, reading comic books and fairy tales, finding an isolated spot in the house and sitting there quietly, imagining myself to be - as my mood directed me - Tarzan, Robinson Crusoe, Robur the Conqueror, *etc.*

In the evening, all of us, father, mother, grandfather, grandmother (ours was an extended family) would either take a walk or bring out chairs and sit in front of the house in the gathering coolness of the night, gossiping. It was pleasant.

Summer nights in our house were extra special. Some of us -

particularly my grandmother and myself - would sleep in the open, on wooden cots covered with crisp, clean sheets. It was extremely pleasant lying there in the coolness of the night, staring up at the star-studded sky and listening to the snores of the rest of the sleepers and the chirrupings of crickets, grasshoppers

and other insects, while the fragrance of spring flowers filled my nostrils.

During holidays, my afternoons were usually spent in grandfather's room. I would lie beside him on his bed and he would tell me stories of great thinkers of the world - and I would lie there assimilating it all, occasionally asking him a question, otherwise remaining silent.

After the story session, he would usually go to sleep and I would get up from his bed and go around prowling in his room, searching for any books of his that I had not read. I would invariably find one book or the other and start reading it at once, sitting in his armchair. These books were usually quite old ones, their bindings torn, their pages termite eaten, and a strange sort of smell rising up from them - a mysterious, magical smell.

Have you ever noticed what books, particularly old books, smell of? They smell of sunny and cloudy days and dark and moonlit nights.

They smell of battlefields and gardens, of open skies and dusty attics, of deserts and mountains, of destinies and purpose. They smell of time.

Friends

I remember a time when late one night, Ali and I sat on a bench in the park near my house.

We started talking about artificiality in our lives.

"Self deception is our darling," I said. We do not have the guts to criticise ourselves. There is artificiality in our thinking, in our actions.

How can we be free of this artificiality?"

At last, Ali spoke: "If one can come out of the circle of self then one is free."

I thought over this statement. "Yes. But self is insidious. It gets into everything and pollutes purity."

"How?"

"Take worship. What kind of worship of God do you think is more laudatory:

worship that is done to get rewards from God, worship that is done in fear of punishment or worship that is done out of love of God?”

“I get your drift. It brings to mind a saying of Ali ibn Abi Talib.”

“Who is Ali ibn Abi Talib?”

“He was the successor of our Prophet Muhammad.”

“And what is the saying?”

“Well, Ali had said that if one worships God in hope of heaven, this is the worship of businessmen; if one worships God in fear of hell, this is the worship of slaves; and if one worships God because He is worth worshipping, this is the worship of a free person.”

“There you are. That is the freedom I am talking about - freedom from the circle of self.”

Jasmine

She is the daughter of a friend of my father.

The first time I met her was when I had completed my under-graduate degree and was lazing around the house, feeling pretty bored while I waited for the summer holidays to end and my Masters program to begin. My father suggested I spend some days at the farmhouse of his friend. I accepted his suggestion.

My first day at the farmhouse: I met a lively young lady who was introduced to me as Jasmine, the daughter of the house. She had been studying abroad and had just completed her under-grad degree as well.

My second day at the farmhouse: I woke up in the morning, went to the bathroom and gave a blood curdling scream because someone had painted a huge moustache on my face.

My third day there, I found missing from my things a book (a Thorne Smith novel) and an unfinished short story of mine. The next day, I found both the items. Along with the book was a note that said, “You seem to have good taste in your reading.” But the most surprising thing was my unfinished story. It was

unfinished no longer.

It had been completed, and completed in a brilliant way.

I knew who was behind all this mischief. Jasmine, of course.

What could I do but marry her?

Significant Event?

The psychoanalysis session over, Anil turned to Ali.

“Can I leave now,” his tone was sarcastic, “or are you taking me to a mental institution?”

Ali smiled. “You have to admit Tony was right in worrying about you. That’s what friends are for.”

“With friends like you two...,” Anil left the expression incomplete, but he smiled.

“I’ll drop you home. Just wait here for a while. I have to get rid of some paperwork at my office.” Ali left. Anil waited in the lobby.

He did not have long to wait. Within minutes, he saw Ali rushing towards him.

“Did you hear the news?”

“What news?” Anil asked.

“The flight that you were supposed to take today, it crashed and everyone on board died.”

“Oh my God!”

Ali just gave him a look. In that look was shock - shock at the thought of what might have happened to Anil if he had taken that flight. In that look was wonder - wonder at the chain of unlikely events that had saved Anil’s life.

Was this the significant event in my life that I had premonition of? Anil

wondered, but then, the feeling of something about to happen still persisted in him.

They reached Anil's house. Anil called Tony over. At first, Tony appeared sheepish over his role in the day's events, but when Ali told him of the net result of the events, he became jubilant.

"Be eternally grateful to me, my boy," he said grandiosely. "I saved your life today."

"And just for that you deserve death punishment, Tony," said Ali.

"I see your point," said Tony thoughtfully. Anil punched him in the arm, went into the kitchen and came out with lemonade and glasses. They sipped the lemonade, talked, and then Ali and Tony left, leaving Anil alone with his thoughts.

Dusk

Anil called his mother and breathed a sigh of relief to find that the operation had gone well and his father was doing fine.

He then booted up his computer and got online. "You made it possible for us never to fear an oppressor." Ali's words echoed in his ears. He sent off an email to his journalist friend – told him about his boss and his drug trafficking, felt a weight being lifted from his soul..

Dusk fell. Inevitably, Anil's thoughts turned to Jasmine. And suddenly, he had had enough of his stubbornness. He picked up the phone and dialled the number of his in-laws. There was no response from the other side. Some problem with the line perhaps. He put down the receiver and stood there silently, wringing his hands. Then he made a decision.

I am going out there to get Jasmine back, he said to himself and came out of the house. It was dusk and the world was lit with the mixed light of the setting sun and the street lamps.

It was only when his car had left the driveway of the building and had moved on to the road that he realised he didn't know where Jasmine's parents lived.

In anguish, he decided to turn back when he suddenly remembered his dream in which he had driven up to the new house of his in-laws and met Jasmine. He remembered it all vividly and on a wild impulse, he let his car retrace the dream path. From one road to another, from one landmark to another, his car moved, the way it had moved in his dream. A long time passed. Suddenly he saw a house in front of him - the same house that he had seen in the dream. He stopped the car, jumped out and walked towards the house, his whole being filled with a sense of wonder. He walked past the main gate. He walked past the beautiful garden. He walked past the portico. He climbed up the steps to the door. He rang the bell.

And Jasmine opened the door.

“What took you so long?” asked Jasmine.

Anil spread his arms and Jasmine stepped forward and into the outstretched arms.

“Let’s go home?” Anil asked. Jasmine nodded.

Night

“There are few things like a good, clean fuck to put life in its proper perspective,” someone had once written, and that night, Anil attested to the truth of this observation.

Pretty soon, Anil and Jasmine lay sweaty and sated in each other’s arms. Jasmine slept, a soft smile playing on her lips.

Anil wallowed for sometime in euphoria as a welcome relaxation spread through his limbs and made them pleasantly heavy. Just before he went to sleep, he thought over the events of the day and realized that there had been not one but many events of significance spread all over the day, including that event of a while ago – the act of copulation.

Anil didn’t know it then, but that night another significant event had taken place. First steps had been taken towards creation of a new life in Jasmine’s womb.

Cultural Clashes in Cádiz

Jetse de Vries

Jetse de Vries is a technical specialist for a propulsion company. He writes SF since 1999, and had his first story published in November 2003. His stories have appeared in about two dozen publications on both sides of the Atlantic, and include Amityville House of Pancakes, vol. 1, JPPN 2, Nemonymous 4, Northwest Passages: A Cascadian Anthology, DeathGrip: Exit Laughing, HUB Magazine #2, and Clarkesworld Magazine (May 2007), SF Waxes Philosophical anthology and Postscripts Magazine #14. He's been part of the Interzone editorial team from March 2003 until September 2008.

Prologue: In the Grotto of the Daring Deeds

In a grotto somewhere between Sierra Bermeja and Serrania de Ronda, shadows dance across the wall of the fire-lit cave like haunted spirits fleeing from enlightenment. Two men, years apart but still close, sit next to the fire. If not for the age difference they could be identical twins. Sleek black hair, pointy brows, prominent noses and thin lips. But twins they are not, neither father and son nor clones.

The young one sprouts a full beard while the old one is clean-shaven.

“Nice beard, Leonard two.”

“Indispensable for an apprentice of the Sufi Path.”

“Apparently you managed to convince the holy man to go on a new quest?”

“It wasn’t easy. When I arrived I found that he was dying. It took all my skills and skullduggery to visit him before they put him on his deathbed. Intestinal cancer was finishing him off. The nanos could barely save him. The damage already done was so great that he has ten more years, tops.”

“Enough to play his part in our grand scheme. Was it hard to inspire him?”

“After some theater they believed I was Allah’s tool miraculously saving the great mystic for his last pilgrimage. The man himself was a lot more difficult to fool, though. I needed several tries with the 3D

equipment to get the vision he needed right. It was still harder to convince him to let me be his apprentice.”

I: In the Hall of the Moorish King

Muhamad I al-Ghalib, King of Gharnata, mentally shakes his head as the two visitors enter his residence. Outwardly he reveals nothing of his slight bafflement, as his welcoming smile is warm and inviting, however hard it is not to smirk. The credentials of his guests look authentic enough, it is more their appearance that defies convention.

The first nobleman, Baron Kirkinnison, is not too bad. His long, gray hair and pointed goatee could have given him the aura of a distinguished gentleman. But his dandy dress spoils much of that effect. The clothing is fine enough; it is all that ornamentation dragging him down. Some restraint would do wonders. Too much frills and frippery, pompous patterns embroidered everywhere, even on his boots. On him, though, at least most of the colors match.

Compared to his younger companion he is a paragon of moderation. Baron Whattage rises up from his deep bow and as his curly, blond locks fall on his shoulders the radiant smile under his curled up moustache is grossly outshined by the screaming, iridescent and intertwined color combinations on his trousers and shirt. Apart from the incompatible compositions they share another symmetry: both are tight at the waist and become very wide at the limbs. Trouser legs wavering out like a Bedouin’s tent, shirtsleeves like a wind-tattered turban unwinding. Oh how he wished he hadn’t asked him to take off his shining, deep purple overcoat. It was tolerable compared to what was lurking beneath.

Normally he wouldn’t have wasted his time with such eccentric lordships from this cold, northerly country but they offer trade and any new source of income is very welcome indeed.

The building of his beloved Alhambra is draining his funds enough as it is, then

there is the ongoing struggle with the Almohads trying to regain the dominance they lost to his Nasrid dynasty. And last—but certainly not least—the problem of fighting off Ferdinand III and his zealous Christians hell bent on their Reconquista. His decision to redirect the regiment at Cádiz to defend Seville against Ferdinand’s furious attack was a two-cutting sword: it saved Seville but it lost Cádiz.

In a perfect world he would reconcile with the Almohads, hold off the Christian hordes and concentrate on the construction of his glorious citadel, his personal palace with the majestic courtyard and a grand reception room, the Hall of the Ambassadors, where lesser officials could deal with clowns like these two.

In the real world, though, he is forced to deal with the lesser devil to get the greater evil off his back. Clowns all right, but rich clowns, so he must pay attention.

“Welcome, dear gentlemen from the north. I understand you seek trade with our humble kingdom?”

“Indeed we do, your highness. We are interested in all kinds of art objects that originate from your culture, like your elegant pottery, your intricate silk tapestries and your finely decorated glassware.”

To al-Ghalib’s dismay, it is Baron Whattage that answers. As he speaks, his hands wave, his feet shuffle, he uses his whole body to emphasize his points. At the same time, the crazy patterns on his clothes move as well. Paradoxical pain: eye-watering effects that are impossible to ignore. Dancing designs with a hypnotic hue. Even Yul, his most stoic guard, has trouble keeping his face straight.

“Our art objects? It seems you gentlemen have no lack of —well-
-ways to express yourselves.”

“We are not really representative—in the artistic sense—of our people. We are only a small minority, the avant-garde. In our middle class, at the moment, arabesques are all the rage.

However, due to unfortunate circumstances like the Crusades and the Reconquista here in Spain, our access to these articles is severely limited.”

“Precisely what I’m wondering, my dear lords. Relations between our cultures are not exactly top notch, as you are well aware. Your monarchs Richard I the Lion-Hearted and John I, for example...”

“True, but these were despots that have ignored the will of the common man. Now with our hard-fought Magna Carta we —the people—are able to approach you directly. You are not our true enemy, the despicable French frogs and those Viking bastards are. The English people never had any fight with you.”

“Do I hear this right: due to this Magna Carta you can trade with us without the implicit consent of your ruler?”

“Correct. Henry III has confirmed our Great Charter. This gives us the liberty to trade with anyone we choose.”

“Interesting. Now how do you gentlemen think to pay for these precious articles of our cultural heritage, these superb examples of our Moorish craftsmanship?”

“Our English money, or, if this is inconvenient, gold. Or maybe you would be interested in weapon deliveries?”

“Weapons? Excuse me, but Christians delivering arms to Muslims? Your king might grant you the liberty of trade but this will certainly not please him.”

“Discreet deliveries. Armaments purely for self-defense. After all, these overzealous Spaniards might just destroy the fine artifacts we seek. Just a deterrent to maintain the status quo.”

“These proposals are...interesting. Would you gentlemen be my guests for the night while I confer with my advisors?”

“We will be delighted. On behalf of Baron Kirkinnison and myself, I hope the night brings you peace and wisdom.”

“Thank you. I hope you will enjoy your stay here. Ahmed and Yassar, show our guests to their quarters.”

#

In their lush guest rooms, Watt and Krikksen evaluate the day’s proceedings.

After ensuring nobody is overhearing them, Krikksen opens the discussion.

“Not bad. Still, weren’t you just a little—ahem—overdressed?”

“Overdressed? Impossible. No such word in my dictionary.

Anyway, was I not supposed to divert the attention while you scanned the place?”

“Sure. His eminence’s guards had enough trouble keeping the tears from their eyes to watch my circumspect self. They now probably think all English are crazy.”

“Not crazy, only somewhat eccentric. Did you find anything?”

“Most certainly. Micromikes and spycams all over the place.

Not top of the line in our timeline, though. So they all had several spontaneous blackouts.”

“Aha, our quarry is active here. I’ve always wondered why they go to such strange places, like undiscovered Americas, Big Brotherish governments and these Dark Middle Ages. Why not hide in the ‘Rio Carnival forever’-timeline?”

“We’d never find him. Even your most garish outfits are normal there.”

“Unimportant. Think of all the time we could spend just searching.”

In the Grotto of the Daring Deeds, part two

The conversation in the cage continues. After the younger man has told about his pilgrimage with the Sufi Master from Damascus back to the Iberian Peninsula, it is time for the older one to report about events in Spain.

“Ferdinand’s Reconquista almost got too much steam. With all my diplomatic and intriguing skills I was able to let him mount an attack on Seville before he was ready for it. The siege failed, by a hair’s breadth. Frustrated, he marched up to Cádiz and took the city by surprise, or so he thinks.”

“So you’ve finally decided to make Cádiz the center of action.

Why not Seville, like we originally planned?”

“A hunch. Its location is better: a seaport almost right on the border of Africa and Europe. Also the place where the next discovery of the new world is launched.”

“How did you fare in Barcelona?”

“Fine. Peter Nolasco is just the right man to approach Ferdinand, I think. And old Ferdinand needs quite some softening up, believe me.”

“Was Saint Peter difficult to convince? I had quite some trouble with Ibn al’Arabi.”

“Peter Nolasco needed just a small push. An Unbloody Mary was enough for him to make his way to Cádiz.”

“You still long for the alcoholic pleasures of your Big Apple days, I see.”

“You know my drinking wasn’t for fun. The real stuff, like single malts and cognac, still have to be invented, let alone cold beer. Only some of the wines are tolerable here. As an apprentice of the Sufi Path, you abhor alcohol, of course.”

“I don’t miss it, never getting the taste for it like you did. That’s why I needed to go to Damascus.”

“A minor reason. Mostly I believe that my cynicism would make it impossible to keep a straight face for all those years with the Muslim mystic.”

“Quite true. Even I had trouble keeping up the charade. Still the pantheistic philosopher is as pure as they come. He constantly doubts his own wisdom; he’s a lot more flexible than you think, even at his advanced age. And a charisma that is almost tangible.”

“You’re still under his spell.”

“Just as much as you’re an alcoholic, not really. I intensely enjoy his lessons, yet I try not to be overwhelmed by them.”

“Balancing on the edge of insight and introversion. Even now you think this

makes sense, our mad scheme?”

“I do, more than ever. Maybe I caught some holy fire, you know.

But how about you, do you still think it worthwhile?”

The older Leonard’s face distorts in a painful grimace. “How dare you ask. It may be much longer ago for me, but I still see her face through tons of burning rubble. I didn’t invest so much to go back now. Also, contrary to my superficial sarcasm, I do hope. Now, the timing is everything. It will be another five hundred years before the dates match so perfectly again.”

II: The Sub-Minimal Men

Early February 1247, Anno Domini, two lonely horseman ride over a dusty plain towards the coastal city of Cádiz. While most of Europe is still embraced in the cold grip of a severe winter, in the province of Andalucía the temperature reaches a balmy 21 centigrade.

The riders proceed a bit awkward, somewhat from lack of experience but also from apprehension, of not knowing what to expect. They’re both young and longhaired, the blond one beardless, the dark-haired one sprouting some random tufts of facial hair. To break the uneasy silence, the fair one starts to speak.

“So these are the Dark Middle Ages? The sun’s so bright it hurts my eyes.”

“Dark as in uncivilized, you know.”

“As opposed to our time being civilized?”

“I guess so. Why?”

“This guy we’re supposed to trace, this Leonard Yomin...”

“What’s with him?”

“I don’t understand why we’re after him. He’s not the criminal type.”

“He illegally used the Trans-Timeline-Transporter and disappeared into this worldline.”

“OK, so he used the triple-T. But he hasn’t done anything illegal before that. No criminal record, on the contrary: a PhD in physics and an M.Sc. in applied electronics. He applied for a job in our research department. They were on the brink of hiring him when he—

well—disappeared.”

“You know the rap: any person trespassing without permission into an uncontaminated worldline can potentially change the course of that world’s history: C.I.P.-violation of the second degree.”

“But what can a single guy do in times like these? The mass readings of the triple-T showed that he arrived here with his clothes and barely anything else.”

“His knowledge. Unleashing technologies in times where the people are not ready for them can have catastrophic consequences.”

“According to theory. But I very much doubt it. Take Leonardo da Vinci, even such a genius hardly made a dent in our history’s course.”

“Come on, Watt. I didn’t make the Causality Interference Policy.

And the CIP is officially part of the law we must try to uphold.”

“OK, Krikksen. But it doesn’t mean I need to agree all the way with it.”

Having voiced his misgivings, the blond horseman takes a more relaxed position. He pulls his red, felt hat over his eyes, shading them from the midday sun and sticks one hand deep in the pocket of his purple silk trousers. Still, not all unease has left his mind, far from it.

“How are we supposed to find him? The locator is only absolutely accurate as to which worldline, but it has an error margin of fifty kilometers and five years.”

“You know the lessons: look for behavior, tools, policies, ideas, almost anything incompatible with the period.”

“In these Dark Middle Ages? You know: dark as in almost no historical records.”

“How would I know? It’s only our first assignment. I guess we have to learn

along the way.”

“Then why Cádiz? There’s Xerez, too, in the 50k circle.”

“Intuition. And it’s much more ancient, more interesting. So I say we try there first.”

Then the dark-haired rider sweeps his left hand over the fabric of his bright green coat in a dismissive gesture, ending the argument.

Watching his attire, other questions rise in his mind.

“You’re sure our clothes are not too gaudy?”

“No problem, we’re from Flanders, aren’t we?”

“Flanders?”

“Awel zunne, the brightest and most flamboyant dressers of the Middle Ages.”

“I thought we were supposed to be British merchants, searching for new markets.”

“The English of that time? Way too dull. No, I decided we’re from Brugge, West Flanders, an upcoming emporium of the Hanseatic League. A virtual monopoly on English wool, lace and its people dressing up like there’s no tomorrow, it’s our perfect cover.”

Surprised by his colleague’s research, Krikksen cannot argue with that. After a few hours, as they reach the gates of Cádiz, he urges Watt to announce them: “You have worked out our cover, after all.”

The guards at the gate seem at least as bewildered as Watt and Krikksen at their mutual sights.

“These guys don’t look like Moors at all!”

“What do we know? Talk to them anyway.”

While Watt talks to the guards in what he hopes to be fluent Arabic, their jaws, that were hanging wide open, clap decidedly shut and their arms are raised

threateningly. This forces Watt to take another approach, quickly.

“Allee, hombre, tu es Espagnol?”

This gives a more positive reaction. Watt excuses himself: “Sorry, signores, but I thought this beautiful city was still in the hands of the Moors.”

“No, stranger, the Reconquista has claimed this city as well.”

“My, my, things move fast in this year of our Lord 1252, don’t they?”

“1252? But it is 1247!”

“Slip of the tongue, a joke. We from Flanders make little jests all the time. Therefore, let me introduce us: Duke Watterstraal and my companion Duke Krikkeman, or Manneke Krik, as our beloved people of the town of Brugge call him. In our function as representatives of the Hanseatic League we like to talk with the mayor of this major port.”

The Imperfect Ghost

In the eighth lunar month of the Islamic year 644, an old, holy man returns to his native land. After his long pilgrimage in the Orient, Ibn al’Arabi wanted to spend his last days in Damascus in peaceful contemplation, teaching and writing. After finishing his masterpiece: Fusus al-hakim (“The Bezels of Wisdom”) he was ready to take up his role in the afterlife.

But Allah decided he was not ready yet. A mysterious stranger saved him from the brink of death. Shortly after that he had a series of visions, the most intense since the revelations in Murcia fifty years ago that set him on his famous pilgrimage. This time, though, they instructed him to go back to his land of birth, incognito, humble and as an emissary of peace.

The first vision was strange. She didn’t look quite as he remembered her, some of her features were all wrong. In Mecca she was so much more vibrant and enchanting, not the static, still picture he was seeing now. It was almost as if Allah was sending his message to the wrong receiver. But such a thing is impossible, indeed, unthinkable. So it must be his own mind that was failing there, he was not ready to receive the divine revelation.

The second vision was somewhat clearer: her eyes had the twinkle he fondly remembered and her beauty was like the one he celebrated in his Tarjuman al-ashwaq (“The Interpreter of Desires”).

It showed him that all is Allah and Allah is all. But then again, the way she addressed him was wrong: all cool, impassive and indifferent, not the sultry voice that sparkled all his passion.

It was with the third vision that he finally understood. Now she was perfect in all her beauty, now she embodied the eternal sophia that had guided him all his life, now she spoke with the sensual whisper of the muse that set his heart afire.

The power of the vision was so great that it swept him away, both literally and figuratively. She arose from a circle of light. Her words were perfect poetry, the kind he tried so hard to capture in the Tarjuman. As in “Expelled from Allah’s Garden”:

*In a dream, wild
I saw a serene sight
An angel smiled
In the red morning light*

*Carved in stone
The circle spoke
Her face shone
The spell broke
And I froze in fear*

*Lightning was hurled
Down, in a bolt
As her lips curled
Breaking the mold
And I fell as a tear*

*From her eyes of gold
While the vision unfurled
The eyes that hold
All the pain in the world
More than I could bear*

*Innocence died
In a vision of fright
An angel cried*

At the fall of night

The divine commandment was unequivocal: “Remember, always, Ibn al’Arabi that Allah is love. There is too much violence in our world. Two religions that have the same prophets but one are fighting each other to the death. This is not sophia, this is madness.

You will travel to the place where the religions are closest, the place you were born. There you will approach your local leader, Muhamad Al-Ghalib and tell him that peace and a mutual understanding between the religions is Allah’s will because in truth, these are but two sides of the same coin, different aspects from all that is real, all that is good, all that is, Allah.”

So he set on his way, with a new apprentice, the strange youngster apparently sent by Allah to save his life. Ibn al’Arabi is the first to admit that he would never have made it back to Andalucía without him. Unquestionably, the young man is the smartest apprentice he has ever had. On the other hand, he can come up with questions that are much too deep and unsettling to come from such an untrained mind. This strange apprentice tries very hard to understand his master, yet the master sometimes wonders if the apprentice truly believes.

On the surface, the young man served him well and got them to the Iberian Peninsula. Below that, Ibn al’Arabi has his doubts. Their discussions are among the wisest he has had, better than most he had with his—supposed—equals. Which made him extra suspicious: it should not be possible. This Yo’min Le’enard, sometimes he seems like Allah’s chosen one to guide him in his last pilgrimage, sometimes he seems like the instrument of evil to test his faith.

In the end, though, Ibn al’Arabi can only do what he must.

Allah’s will is inscrutable, and he can only try to serve him with the best of his abilities. They are approaching Gharnata and Yo’min will present their credentials to Muhamad al-Ghalib’s guards. Maybe things will clear up after he talks with the Moorish king, but somehow the wizened Muslim mystic doubts that.

III: Second Variety?

Cádiz! One of the oldest cities in Europe. Also one of the most picturesque, with sights subtle and enchanting, the city's charms creeping up on you slowly but inexorably. White mosques with bright-colored domes between humble houses, elegant in their simplicity. The pathway on the city's bulwark doubles as a beautiful promenade, overlooking the crowded center. A center where narrow alleys zigzag through dense conglomerations, leading to prominent plazas, broad main streets and well-cultured parks.

Watt and Krikksen walk these alluring alleys. Their horses, after having their shoes renewed by the town's blacksmith—a guy so big and fat that he might be able to lift them—are now enjoying a well-deserved rest in the city's stables. As usual, their unusual outfits draw plenty of attention. Seemingly oblivious, they plow through the thickening crowd, cool outward, gleeful inward. This bustling, vibrant city is quite contrary to the dark, stagnant streets of perdition they were mentally prepared for.

Their light mood would be disturbed if they knew who was watching them, quiet and astonished. Two gentlemen that, by an unprecedented act of will, look only slightly conspicuous.

“By all Jerry's lost picks, that's us!”

“Younger versions of us. Did we really dress like that?”

“I guess we did. Mind you, my junior's bright yellow overcoat matches nicely with those purple tights.”

“But those ultramarine bells on his megapink boots are not exactly ne plus ultra.”

“Really? Anyway, luckily we're incognito so they don't notice us.”

“OK, Watt, let's go in this tavern and discuss this complication.”

“Right. And some wine to ease the shock.”

The older Watt and Krikksen enter the inn that is filled with merry people enthusiastically discussing preparations for certain festivities. They tactfully seat

themselves at a corner table near the back entrance with a good view of the front door, just in case. After the waiter has brought them a carafe of the local Jerez they begin to talk business, with Krikksen being concise and Watt wasting the most words.

“Those junior versions of us must come from a near-identical timeline with TTT-capacity. Would they be after the same quarry?”

“Probably.”

“But the chances of that happening are infinitesimal. Did they chase their prey to the wrong worldline?”

“Unlikely.”

“Unlikely? Have you forgotten how many mistakes we made when we were young?”

“No. But our equipment—and theirs must be equivalent—never set us in the wrong world.”

“True. Then what are they doing here? Going after another guy?”

“No.”

“No? How can we be tracing the same guy? We’re from another worldline, fergarciasakes!”

“Look, Watt. We have fingerprints, iris scan, DNA-sequence and exact age of our quarry. If theirs has exactly the same characteristics, which is so unlikely as to be well-nigh impossible, for all purposes he is our quarry.”

“I get you. He’s the same guy, but from their worldline.”

“Right. So probably also somewhat less devious, less experienced as our quarry.”

“Aha. Easier to trace.”

“And he might lead us to our quarry. I suspect our man—who after all managed

to fabricate his own TTT, a feat unparalleled in the Multiverse—picked up or contacted our juniors' quarry from his worldline.”

“Reinforcements from a parallel Universe. So we can cooperate with our juniors? We're the best mentors they could wish for.”

“Unfortunately not. I checked the rules: In the extremely unlikely event of meeting fellow agents from a near-identical timeline, keep your mutual distance. In the General Multiverse Treaty it was decided that each worldline in possession of TTT-equipment must take care of its own renegades. Otherwise we'll never stop working, I guess.”

“A shame. Imagine the flamboyance of my youth combined with the experience of my superior years...”

“I think no parallel world is quite ready for that.”

‘Reconquista, Ferdinand!’ said the Hailmaryman

Ferdinand III, king of Castile and Leon, is talking with his best spy. He doesn't like what he's hearing but this is one of the qualities that make this man so valuable: he does not twist the truth in order to please his majesty. He looks like the kind of half-breed that might pass unnoticed in both camps: his heavy brow, prominent nose and slight olive skin represent a Moorish kinship; his fine moustache, noble mouth and the resolute yet impertinent set of his eyes betray a Spanish ancestry. Léon's recommendations would have imprisoned a lesser informant, just for infuriating the king.

“It might be advisable to make a temporary truce. The failed siege of Seville has drained your funds and the Knights Templar are—

understandably—reluctant to finance a new military adventure.”

“A truce? No way, we must crush the infidels. Drive them from our homeland!”

“Unfortunately, these infidels are not so easily crushed. Some time off to regain our strength would surely be in order.”

“Do you realise time is something I am running out of? We must push on, Córdoba, Jaén and Cádiz have returned to the mother country, Seville must

follow!”

Léon’s big Adam’s apple bobs slightly as if swallowing a sigh.

“With Córdoba and Jaén we were better prepared and we profited from the internal struggle between the Almohad and Nasrid dynasties.

We weren’t so lucky last time.”

“Luck’s got nothing to do with it. We are God’s chosen carrying through his Reconquista—”

“Of course. As long as God’s hand is helped by fresh armaments from the Knights Templar, superior intelligence and other convenient circumstances. At Seville those were not forthcoming.”

Sometimes Ferdinand wishes to dispose of this strange man, this illicit informer with his impious mouth. But, blaspheming as he might seem, his information is so valuable as to be quite indispensable.

“So you admit that superior intelligence, your department, was lacking as well.”

“I am sorry, your highness, but even I cannot go in and out of a thoroughly sieged city. Furthermore, I advised you against moving to Seville too soon.”

“True. However I cannot suppress the feeling that we were this close to taking the city, several times.” The distance between Ferdinand’s thumb and forefinger is barely enough to hold the thinnest of papers.

“Close, but not close enough. However, the moment I found out that the Moors had withdrawn their regiment at Cádiz you knew the city was there for the taking, like an overripe pomegranate.”

“A minor victory after a devastating defeat. The recapture of Seville would be the crown on my Reconquista campaign, the reward for my pious life.”

“Sire, I am as disappointed as you are. Yet the ways of the Lord are inscrutable. It may still happen if we act prudent and wise.”

“And you think negotiations are the answer? Heed to the heathens?”

“For the moment, yes. To the best of my knowledge, Al-Ghalib has reconciled with the Almohads and is now in the process of assembling a force to recapture Cádiz. He seems to have found a source of new armaments.”

“Let him come with his army, we will slay them at the gates of this God-given city.”

“It would be more advisable to avoid battle while we lick our wounds. I would even say: surprise him with a peace offer.”

“A peace offer? Me, Ferdinand, the leader of the Reconquista?

Are you out of your mind?”

“A temporary truce, of course, until the time is ripe for the conquest of Seville. Lull them to sleep in the meantime. Now is the perfect moment for a ceasefire. Did you know that this year Lent starts on exactly the same day as their fasting period, the Ramadan?”

“Do they fast as well?”

“Certainly. Only a lunar month instead of our 40 days, but even so. We could propose a truce during that period to begin with, and—

to show our good intentions—invite a delegation of them to join in the Carnival celebrations.”

“Not only make peace but party with them as well? Why not give Al-Ghalib my daughter as a bride, too!”

“Of course not. But we must play this well. Al-Ghalib will see through a halfhearted peace proposal. An official invitation to one of our most important festivities though, is an offer he can’t refuse. It will delay his war plans and give us breathing space.”

“You are very devious indeed. Still you must also know how I hate to deal directly with the infidels.”

“Then don’t do the proposal yourself. Send an emissary.”

“I need to think about this crazy proposal of yours. Dismissed.”

Even more stealthily than he came in, the strange spy makes his exit, leaving Ferdinand alone with his thoughts. He is getting old. He feels it in his heart and in his bones but mostly in his head. He’s had a hard life. Fighting his father over the legacy of Leon. Fighting the Moors to reconquer Spain. Fighting his first wife Beatrice over the stupidest of things.

Not that he ever married for love. Politics prevail; especially marrying the daughter of the Holy Roman emperor seemed a good idea at the time. However, when Frederick II’s attempt at reconciliation with the new Holy Father backfired it muddled things up considerably. Through all their fights, though, she did give him an heir, their son Alfonso, before she died. Now his second marriage is turning sour, too.

Still it would all be worthwhile if he could have put the crown on his military campaign. After the fall of Jaén Seville seemed ready for the taking. Conquering Seville would have been the pinnacle of the Reconquista. Al-Ghalib would have become his vassal. More importantly: it would have been a sure ticket to sainthood. His ultimate prize: to be canonized, to be named San Fernando, to be remembered forever, maybe even have his own feast day.

But he failed. He put all his effort in the long siege and every time he thought he’d make a breakthrough something happened. New armaments arriving too late or not at all. An outburst of dysentery in his troops just when they were ready to bring down the main gates.

Much more resistance than he had expected (the Cádiz regiment, undoubtedly).

The swift conquest of Cádiz was small consolation after the failed siege of Seville. Worsened by this report of the Moors preparing to retake the city from him. His disturbing thoughts are interrupted by an announcement of his master of protocol.

“Peter Nolasco of the Mercedarians requesting an audience.”

Peter Nolasco, the famous ransomier and exemplary priest. What is he doing in Cádiz? Intrigued, Ferdinand immediately grants the request.

“Welcome, Father. What brings such an esteemed man to this humble city?”

“Thank you, sire, for granting me this audience. In all honesty, just between us: I had a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary instructing me to go here.”

“By the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost,” Ferdinand exclaims as he crosses himself. “We only recovered the city a few days ago. Only God would know...”

“As He indeed does, your majesty. I am only a minor player in His Grand Chess Game, yet He moved me very timely, as you astutely realise.”

“Mysterious are the ways of the Lord. Did the Mother of the Immaculate Conception tell you why?”

“Only that things would become clear at the right time, your highness. She said my negotiating skills would be required.”

“While it has always been my belief that my humble role was to lead the Reconquista. It has driven me all my life, a holy fire burning within me. In my hubris I thought it would bring me sainthood—” The words escape Ferdinand’s mouth before he can stop them. But instead of rebuking him, Peter Nolasco shows understanding.

“There are other ways to sainthood, your majesty. Last year I had the honor of visiting the Holy Father in Lyon. In a private moment, he conceded to me that he was—at times—getting weary of all the increasing troubles in our world. For the eyes of the world he needs to support the Reconquista, but inwardly he yearns for peace.”

“But His Holiness surely has other things on his mind, his conflict with Frederick II, the liberation of the Holy Land, the advance of the Mongols...”

“All too true, your majesty, but his peaceful intentions are clear.

He has sent a mission to the Great Khan, led by Giovanni Carpini; he is attempting ecumenical union with the Eastern Church. He implied that my meager efforts might find a rightful reward in due time.”

“So he knew of your ransoming of our imprisoned fellow Christians?”

“Indeed he did. Even in these dire times, he keeps track of his lesser dignitaries. So be assured he has not lost sight of you and your sacrifices for the church.

Quite possibly a temporary change of policy might be sensible.”

“I was just considering such a thing, to be honest. But my reputation as zealous leader of the Reconquista hardly makes me the right negotiator.”

“I can be your emissary to the Moors, your highness. I have negotiated with them before, they know I am true to my word.”

“What you say makes a lot of sense. By the way, did you know that the Moors’ fasting period, called Ramadan, exactly coincides with Lent this year?”

IV: The Flame of the Dancer and the Free

Festivities brighten up the promenades of Cádiz. In fact the whole city has turned into one big festival: everybody is disguised, dressed up in their most colorful outfits or even in costumes prepared specially for the occasion. People are not the only ones that have changed. From the vibrant sails and lively flags of the ships in the harbor to the extra ornaments of the main gate of the thin peninsula: even the smallest lane has become a grand decoration street.

Those streets seem to hold more than meets the eye. The streets are filled with people, partying like there is no tomorrow. The streets are filled with sounds: shouts, happy banter, cheering chants and merry music. The streets are filled with swirling clouds of confetti, wild waving banderoles and the clattering of the richly assorted small sweets thrown everywhere. The streets are filled with atmosphere, with vibrancy, with a special quality, that indefinable extra that gives a city its character. Even then the streets are not completely filled: there still is the resonance of expectation, of yet another gap to be filled.

The younger Watt and Krikksen walk through these streets, for once hardly standing out and enjoying every minute of it. They absorb the anticipation in the air and radiate it back, amplified. Then they hear a strange overtone in the invigorating noise, something not really disharmonic but still in discord with the general racket yet with a harmony of itself. Somebody singing a solitary chant of sadness and sorrow, using only a single phrase.

"AyeAyeAyeAyeAyeAyeAyeAyeAyeAyeAyeAyeAye"

It is Jorge José Jesus Juan Guadalajara, the acknowledged master of the cante

jondo, the tremendous tenor of the profound sound. He started as a classical chanter of the grande cante, singing about death, anguish, despair and religion. But as the expressive power of his voice grew, he evolved beyond the need to use actual words. Pain breaths from the timbre of his voice, anguish gushes from the subtle shades of his sighs, despair is denominated by the depth of his desire and his religious fervor is emanated by the exaltation of his exhalations.

“AyeAyeAyeAyeAyeAyeAyeAyeAyeAyeAyeAyeAyeAyeAye”

To the untrained ear it may sound like one long litany of lamentations, but to the connoisseurs of the curtailed cry, the aficionados of the accentuated aye it is both fresh panne from the oven and pure manna from heaven, a feast for the senses and the spirit. Each single “Aye” echoes with its own inflection, each incantation with its own intonation. Every delicate permutation emphasizing another strain of suffering.

Although his incessant intensities are quite in contrast to the general mood, the festive spirit has risen to such heights that it easily tolerates, almost incorporates this distinct voice. Jorge climbs the stair of an elevation in the plaza so that his voice can carry further over the heads of all the partygoers. A circle of admirers gathers around the plaza's plateau, followed by more people, clapping their hands in approval and encouragement. In its enthusiasm, the crowd cheers:

“Viva el cantator!”

Watt and Krikksen begin to appreciate it, too.

“Do you hear that? Heavy stuff, man!”

“Far out. Down in the dumps to the nth degree.”

“He makes the blues sound like the wailings of a lovesick puppy.”

“And listen how he interacts with the crowd’s clapping, the guy can improvise as well.”

“I wanna chip in. Hey hombre,” Krikksen says to a bystander carrying a guitar on his back, “Can I borrow your guitarra for a moment?”

“Aye, Los Flamandos locos,” the spectator says, “Be my guest.”

Strapping the guitar on, Krikksen walks up the rise and strikes a sustained chord. He tries several others until he finds one that complements the sad singer's cantations. The enthusiastic crowd applauds their jam session. Krikksen plays on, calling up every inch of restraint not to drift off into Jerry Garcia territory. Instead, he focuses on the rhythm clapped by the audience and adapts his riff churning around that. The crowd goes crazy:

"Lo Flamando poco-loco."

"Viva el guitarrero!"

In the meantime, the Moorish party delegation has gathered near this happening. Breathtaking belly dancers, fakirs performing freakish acts like laying on a bed of nails, eating fire and spitting flames, expert jugglers keeping up an amazing amount of multihued balls, acrobats forming human pyramids, the lot. While the Spanish clap their rhythm with their hands, the Moors appear to have a special instrument for that: two handheld, hollowed-out pieces of hardwood.

They are tied together with a chord; the chord is secured to the thumb while the fingers clap the pieces together, creating a rapid drumming sound, dry and penetrating. These pear-shaped clappers closely resemble big chestnuts so the crowd, going bonkers and bananas, shouts:

"Viva los castaños!"

Then Watt cannot refrain himself anymore and he storms the temporary stage with three great strides and a big jump. A fanatical free-time tap dancer, he raps out a rhythm of his own with his heavy boots on the plateau's marble floor. While his arms and upper body move with economy and grace, his dazzling legwork and intricate steps, accompanied by the clicking foot music set the crowd on fire: "Lo Flamando todo-loco."

"Viva el zapateador!"

Now one of the Moorish belly dancers hurtles herself forward through the crowd and completes the spectacle. She joins Watt in his feverish tap dance, matching her belly dance with Watt's performance in a weird yet elegant way. Circling each other, each seemingly in a gracious orbit of their own. Her hips and abdomen swing in a pulsating, quintessential Arabic cadence that is complementary at the same time, while her hands wave enchanting patterns

hypnotizing everyone. Her dark eyes radiate passion and fire, of which not the least part is aimed at her strange, flamboyant dance partner. His feet keep up their blurring movements while his torso remains almost still.

He acts cool and controlled; but his longing glances her way betray something else. The crowd, if not already there, goes completely apeshit:

“Viva el bailarín!”

Music and dance at the fringes of cultures, a spontaneous combustion of just the right ingredients: of passion and fire, wonder and desire; of poetry and madness, party and sadness; of dancing on strings, flying without wings. The lighting of a new flame, started by Spanish effusiveness, catalyzed by Flemish absurdity, harmonizing with Moorish élan.

“AyeAyeAye,” as some astute Spaniard would put it, “flamma, flamando, *flamenco!*”

So everybody is completely crazy, but what do you expect: it is Carnival!

Reasons to be Gleeful, part three

Just as Muhamad al-Ghalib thought he had seen it all, another unexpected visitor announces himself at his court. As if things weren’t spinning out of his control already. First those queer English barons proposing—of all things—arms in the form of trade, then the sudden arrival of the great master of the Sufi Path, Ibn al’Arabi with a strange, sly apprentice. Enter Peter Nolasco, the Christian ransomier.

Do these people not realise he’s trying to build the Alhambra, here?

It seems like the world is slowly going crazy. But, whatever happens, let it not be said that the king of the Moors is not a man of the world, reasonable and hospitable. He can always get mad or even later. Al-Ghalib signals his master of protocol to let the visitor in.

“Welcome, dear father, in my humble house. What tidings do you bring?” al-Ghalib says in passable Spanish.

“Glad tidings, your majesty.” Peter Nolasco answers in understandable Arabic,

“Peace proposals from king Ferdinand.”

“Peace proposals?” al-Ghalib says, stunned, “From the fierce warrior of the Reconquista, the zealous leader that has foresworn to drive us heretics from his homeland?”

“Well, peace proposals is somewhat overstating it, but I am fully authorized by the kingdom of Castile and Leon to negotiate a temporary truce between the two parties.”

A ceasefire to cement the standoff al-Ghalib thinks, that’s more like my esteemed, scheming opponent. Out loud, he says: “How do I know you are not setting me up?”

“I know this may sound strange to you, your majesty, but I assure you our intentions are sincere. Allow me to explain.

“First: did you know that our Christian fasting period, Lent, begins on exactly the same day as your fasting period, the Ramadan, this year? Some would say this is pure chance, but I do not believe that. I believe this was preordained, a subtle sign from above to change our policies.

“Therefore we propose to keep the truce at least until the end of Lent, or longer if both sides so agree.

“Furthermore, to prove our good intentions, I have an official invitation for a delegation from your side to join or preLent celebrations called Carnival.”

#

After Peter Nolasco has been led to the guest quarters, al-Ghalib muses about this new development. There have been more lulls in their fight over the decades; this is just the first time they are trying to make it official. Of course, the party that is first ready to strike again will break it, but for now, it’s not a bad preposition.

It gives him time to see if these Englishmen were serious with their weird proposals. Even if they’re not, he could use the time to reconcile with the Almohads. After the bloody siege of Seville they should now realise that the two dynasties must stand together against the Christian coalition if we want to

remain on the Iberian Peninsula.

With Ibn al'Arabi preaching love, peace and harmony in every mosque and on every street corner of Gharnata, a temporary truce will meet with approval amongst his people.

Also, Ferdinand is probably licking his wounds, as well. The Knights Templar will not be overjoyed with the failed attack on Seville so Ferdinand might be short of funds, too. Best to put up with the charade and send a party delegation to their celebrations.

Those barbarians. Don't they know you're supposed to party after the fasting?

V: Juggologic

On the second day of Carnival, the Moorish party delegation sets out again to participate in this crazy festival. Yul, the chief of the—disguised—security party guarding the artists and most specifically the belly dancers, fiddles around a bit. His mood is fine but not quite perfect. He enjoys the celebrations of these crazy Spaniard Christians that party before the fasting. A Muslim celebrates after the abstinence, and then only for one day. OK, their Lent is ten days longer than our Ramadan, but feasting for four days? One Spaniard told him one day of feasting for every ten days of fasting, so there is some logic there. Somehow it makes sense to stuff yourself before the fasting. They just do it a bit excessively.

He likes the Carnival well enough; his problem is that he wants to join in, if only for a little while, instead of constantly being on guard for the belly dancers. Get into the spirit of the thing. As a young boy, he loved to juggle. He was of the 'juggling 9 or dropping 10' kind, being quite good, but not top notch. On a good day he could keep up ten balls. Amateurish, compared to the amount the best jugglers nowadays throw around, let alone the patterns they make with them.

It both astonishes and frustrates him and it doesn't cease to amaze the Spaniards either.

Little boys grow big and Yul grew very big indeed. As tall as the tallest of the troupe, but easily twice as broad, Yul is a giant among the Moors. While he still likes to think of himself as Yul the Juggler, with those big muscles rippling under his olive skin and his prominent bald-shaven head, the belly dancers soon called

him Yul the Stunner.

The weight lifting tricks he did soon bored him witless, made him feel like Yul the Struggler. The offer to join al-Ghalib's palace guard was quite welcome. His imposing physique, sharp eyes and quick wit eventually got him promoted to chief. Now this assignment brings a temporary reunion with his old troupe.

A happy reunion, not in the least enhanced by the circumstances.

Things are great; Yul just wishes he could make them perfect. The atmosphere is there, the Spaniards even allow the troupe and his men to walk over the bulwark surrounding the city, so that they are even more visible to the city's partygoers. Such a complete trust, they even haven't bothered to remove the cannons and the piles of cannonballs.

Then—standing on this ton of bricks—inspiration hits him.

He moves to a heap of cannonballs, a pile of ten stacked up like a triangular pyramid. He takes the top one in his huge right hand, weighs it and nods to himself. Not quite as heavy as he feared. He throws it high in the air, quickly takes a second and a third and before anyone realizes what happens Yul is juggling three cannonballs.

As the rest begin to gaze in astonishment, Yul thinks that this is a lot easier than he thought. He calls out to one of his men: "Yassar! Give me one more!"

The sight of his stoic boss going crazy paralyzes Yassar, but only shortly, as he remembers the penalty for disobedience. Then, acting as if it's the most normal thing in the world, he walks over to the cannonball pile. A startled expression lights his face for the shortest moment, then he huffs and puffs as he lifts a cannon ball and hands it to his chief.

Juggling four, Yul wants more.

"One more!"

The stunned Yassar hands over another to Yul the Stunner.

"One more!"

Six still doesn't finish Yul's fix.

"One more!"

Seven, not enough to be in heaven.

"One more!"

Eight, hand of sleight, can he take the weight?

"One more!"

Nine, a smile breaks through his contorted concentration, he feels fine.

"One more!"

Then, in a final tour de force, Yul is juggling all ten. In the meantime, a big crowd has gathered before the defensive harbor wall and is cheering Yul on. At first, only a few of the festive crowd noticed the spectacle and with a big "Oh!" draw the attention of their friends. These cry in surprise: "Aye!" and, soon after that, in appreciation: "El Jocolatore!"

The cries, shouted almost simultaneously but in disharmony, mix, mingle and warble.

*"Oh!"

"Aye!"

"El jocolatore!"

"Oh—El—Aye—jocolatore!"

"O—L—ye—olate!"

"OLE—ole—olé!"*

A new yell is born. Yul keeps juggling, seemingly effortless.

The master jugglers of the troupe gaze in astonishment. The belly dancers, though, seize the opportunity and start dancing in a big circle around Yul. The

crowd freaks out and the cries of olé echo around the whole city.

“Olé, olé, olé!”

But even the inhumanly strong Yul can’t keep this up for long so after his ten minutes in the spotlight he calls his assistant again: “Yassar, take one!”

One by one, the cannonballs are put back in their triangular pile, among loud cheers from the mesmerized masses. Still, Yul figures the moment is not yet perfect. Ten long minutes of limelight is good, but somehow they cry out for more. The veiled girls keep up their hypnotic dance and Yul knows exactly how to end with a bang.

He calls up three petite dancers he still knows from his touring days and asks them to dance right in front of him.

“Keep facing the crowd,” he whispers loudly over the excited din as they comply, “and whatever happens, trust me.”

The girls look small against the huge Yul, who holds up his long arms and claps his hands above his head to fire up the crowd further.

He is answered by a rising roar of rhythmic applause, clapping hands, snapping fingers and clicking castañets.

A naughty gleam appears in Yul’s eyes as his huge hands go down, grip the waist of the first girl and throw her up, high in the air.

Her slightly shocked shout is hardly heard as in blurring speed the other two follow suit. Their surprised cries turn into screams of delight as they realize what the multitude must be seeing: Yul the Stunner is juggling belly dancers!

The girls, hardened performers under their fragile looks, start swinging their bellies as they swoop through the air in slow arches.

Yul has no time to smile as this is hard labor, taxing him to the max.

Then again, nobody notices the beads of sweat on his head and body as all eyes are on the graceful girls who milk the moment for all its worth. A performance to burn itself in the collective unconsciousness, an act to never forget.

Knowing the limits of his strength, Yul puts the girls down one by one. Any small glitch from his side is expertly covered up in the athletic way the acrobatic dancers land on their feet and dance on as if nothing happened.

The crowd goes berserk, barking mad, over the top and completely knockout. Yul bows to the astounded audience, baths in the bottomless admiration and thinks: 'if this isn't fifteen minutes of fame than I am a pudding of poodle poo.' Knowing that stopping at the very peak of his performance is the best timing he retreats behind the ranks of his security staff. Only Jeffe Garreta, the Spanish defense commandante, also celebrating Carnival and oléing with the jolliest of them, would understand the wink that is exchanged between Yul and his assistant Yassar: the cannonballs on display were lightweight dummies exhibited to hide the actual lack of ammunition.

But what the heck, who cares, it's Carnival!

Empty Illustrations

Granada, or Gharnata as its Moorish inhabitants call it, baths in the sun's radiance, light so pure it seems like light from light. In this light its many mosques look whiter than white, so white as to induce headaches in some. On the other side of the Darro River the Generalife and the building of the Alhambra, the old and the new palace for the sultans, stare down at the Albayzin quarter.

In one of its narrow, cobbled streets, walking between the red-bricked cármenes, Sufi Master Ibn al'Arabi and his apprentice Yo'min Le'enard are discussing both spiritual and earthly matters.

"Apprentice, I keep wondering: how strong is your belief, how strong is the tawhid within you?"

"Master, I witness that there is no deity but God."

"Don't give me the answer by the book, tell me what you feel."

"Allah loves us and we love him."

"There is no doubt in your heart?"

“Master, there is uncertainty lingering in my mind. My heart believes with passion and fire, yet the seeds of doubt are difficult to expel from my mind.”

“Other masters would have purged you for less, my wayward son.

Now why do you doubt?”

“It is all the fighting. The Crusades, the Reconquista and those rumors of a fierce race from the East heading for the Holy City of Jerusalem. My mind wonders why a God that loves his people would allow all those wars.”

“Watch your hubris, apprentice. No mere human can understand the mind of God.”

“Forgive me, master. I just wished I could do more to convince people that love and peace are wiser than war and hatred.”

“It is your inclination towards action. Disregard the unruliness of youth and adopt a more meditative attitude. Develop your inner life.”

“I try. Yet as you teach me, should I not try to teach even the smallest of wisdoms to the common man?”

“I sense an innate need in you to change reality, if only by the littlest of bits. Certainly you should know that only Allah is capable of this.”

“But Master, is it not that God and creation are two different aspects of reality, but two sides of the same coin?”

“Wahdat al-wujud: depending on each other and reflecting each other. You remember my lessons well.”

“So if we see an aspect of Allah mirrored in reality, should we not act upon it?”

“Are you saying that you have received Dhawq, a direct taste of divine truth?”

“No, master, perish the thought. I am but a humble apprentice that has still so much to learn. It’s just that some signs are so clear, so straightforward that they seem undeniable.”

“Such as?”

“Well, first there is your return to your native land. Then the conjunction of Ramadan and Lent, the peace proposal from the Christians and their invitation to join their pre-fasting celebrations.

Shouldn’t we go too, master?”

“A humble Sufi mystic and his—supposedly—humbler servant?

What can we do there?”

“I don’t know, why not just be there? After all, didn’t you teach me that it was the prophet Mohammed who brought peace in his war-torn Arabia?”

“Apprentice, sometimes you seem wise beyond your years. Still, I think you are far from attaining Ikhlas.”

“I try to learn, Master, very hard. I attempt to incorporate everything my senses give me, pick up on our science, yet there is no overall picture arising from that growing body of knowledge.”

“Science alone is not enough. Intuitive knowledge is needed to reach beyond science, to receive illumination to which reason has no access.”

“I hope that someday I will attain such an insight.”

“You may, or you may not. Inshallah. Just don’t forget to love.”

“Love?”

“Love is more important than knowledge.”

“Yes, but is it alone enough to conquer all?”

“What do you mean by that, Yo’min Le’enard?”

“Nothing master, just my ignorance babbling.”

VI: Carriage Cars in Spain

Big, fat Pedro Martes, the blacksmith, is jealous. Jealous of this big, strong Moor that stole the show yesterday. He, big, fat Pedro Martes is the strongest man in town. However, after the crazy stunts of this bald Moor, everybody seems to have forgotten. Even his best friends were teasing him. 'Are you now going to juggle horseshoes before you put them on, Pedro?' one said, followed by: 'No, they're too hot. He'll throw the horse in the air and let it land exactly on the new horseshoes!' as another said: 'And for good customers he'll balance the anvil on his nose!'

Normally, Pedro can take a joke. But this is too much, his honor is at stake. He must do something. He must think of something. He must pull off some crazy stunt, if only to re-establish his self-esteem.

He mentioned this to his friends, and, after their laughter had died down and they started to think, they agreed. All very nice, these Moorish spectacles, but we Spaniards will not be outdone. So Pedro has the muscles and we must provide the brains. Athletics is not his strongest point but he is indeed very, very strong. Eventually they came up with something, then had to work through half the night to prepare it. But hey, with Carnival this is all in a day's work.

Today the traditional tug of war is held. Quite boring, actually, as Pedro's team always wins. Therefore, it is postponed until tomorrow while something else has been put on the agenda.

In the middle of the main street five carriages have been lined up after each other. The carriages are big rectangular ones, normally used to carry goods. The horses pulling them are absent. Strangely, the wooden shafts of the aft wagons are fixed to the back of the carriage before them. Furthermore, there are no horses anywhere to be seen.

Empty carriages alone, though, are a boring sight. Therefore, Pedro's friends walk through the gathered crowd and ask the people with the most extravagant, most outré outfits to display themselves on the wagons. Not forgetting their guests, they ask the most flamboyant of the Moorish party delegation to congregate on the middle carriage.

The audience, puzzled and curious as to what is going on, watches in relative quiet at first but becomes more involved as they see who is climbing the carriages. The more colorful the costume, the dandier the disguise, the louder the

cheers of the crowd. Nor do they always agree with every choice Pedro's compadres make: a bad choice is booed away and personal favorites are put forward that—if the partying masses make enough approving noise—are allowed to mount one of the carriages.

Then, as all the carriages are filled with the prettiest peacocks, bodacious belladonnas and exhaustive ensembles, the door of a nearby building opens. From it big, fat Pedro comes out wearing an outfit that some ladies would definitely consider kinky. However, the black leather body gear and collar serve another purpose: his friends rig it up with the pulling shaft of the front carriage. After they have made sure that everything is connected nice, tight and double secure they leave the show up to Pedro.

By then even the most dim-witted suspects what's going on. Not a contest between two live teams, but a contest of wills between a man and inertia, with resistance thrown in for good measure. No tug of war of man against man, but raw foot'n'guts against stagnancy found awry. A treat of traction and immense introspection.

Surely this is impossible? What normally requires a couple of horses cannot be done by a single man. Pedro seems to think otherwise. The crowd becomes silent as he takes a very deep breath and concentrates.

His eyes glaze over and acquire that certain look. It's a distinctive quality that can evoke magic. It's the kind of gleam and the way these eyes are set that, if you see it in a dark, lonely one-way street, makes you do things you thought impossible before. Like vertical wall climbing. Like setting a new world record for the 100-meter sprint. The way they look right now would probably make you fly.

Then he throws himself forward, utters a mighty moan and pulls, pulls, pulls with every tense muscle in his big body. The gathered people cannot hold their silence any longer and start cheering Pedro on.

“Olé, Pedro, olé!”

Hardly heard above the crowd's noise something's creaking, is that his muscles or something else? The creaking continues and the foremost carriage makes the slightest of movements, seems to gain a minimal momentum before it stops with a clack.

“Pedro es loco!”

Some of the people shout as they cannot see Pedro pulling it off.

However, Pedro is barely warming up. Now the first two carriages seem to move slightly as the slack between them is tautened. The creaking increases until it is stopped by a second clack.

“Pedro motivo!”

Others cry as they see the almost imperceptible movements.

Pedro is increasing his effort, deep down there’s some reserves left.

Three carriages now emit a triple squeak; the exhibited exemplars of deft disguisers on those quickly shift their feet in order not to lose their balance when the next clack announces itself.

“Olé, Pedro es loco!”

Shouted this time with an admiring edge as four cars crunch through the gravel of the street. When the fourth and final clack tries to disturb the equilibrium of the cars’ perplexed passengers some decide that, since they’re shifting anyway, they might as well start dancing.

“Olé, Pedro motivo!”

Now Pedro really has to give it all he’s got. Tapping all his reservoirs, physical, mental and metaphysical if need be. He’s almost there; he has to do it, even if it will rip the tendons of his bones. The way he looks now, with every muscle almost bulging out of his skin, with his eyes focused on an imaginary opponent that needs to be crushed at all cost, with a grimace that says he will not be stopped by anything, would make any prospective wrestling candidate facing him long for lesser dangers like a stampede of bulls or an attacking Mongolian horde.

“Pedro es loco! Motivo! Olé!”

The crowd can’t believe it: the madman is moving. The five carriages creak, groan, squeak and sputter as if protesting, but they move. Slowly, ever so slowly,

but they're moving. The occupants of the carriages begin to dance wildly; the chanting hordes begin to shout hoarsely:

"Pedro es loco motivo! Pedro el locomotivo! Pedro el locomotivo!"

The madman is moving. Strangely, he finds that as he gains speed he needs less effort to keep the cars moving. The train of carriages moves, not fast, more like a row of barges floating past, but they are moving. Eventually he settles on a walking speed that he can keep up for quite some time and begins to make his triumphant tour through the city, tugging a complete spirited party in his wake.

Everybody loves it, bathes in it, in the spirit of celebration, everybody on the carriages slowly floating by a celebrity for a day, with Pedro as their driving force. Again, the festivities reach an unprecedented peak, another pinnacle in the permutation of the people's party. You might wonder where it will all lead to, eventually.

But hey! It is Carnival!

We Anticipate Events Otherwise

In an inconspicuous apartment somewhere in the center of Cádiz, an apprentice of the Sufi Path and an undercover agent of the kingdom of Castile and Leon have an animated discussion. The strange language they speak is almost lost in the noise rising from the celebrating crowd in the streets outside.

"Was it wise to let the older Watt and Krikksen find out about your presence here? You could have taken away the obsolete equipment from their timeline. They probably wouldn't have detected your improved gadgets." The young one says.

"Of course not. My self-designed, superior equipment was picking up their detectors as they detected the decoys." The old one answers.

"You could have noticed them without drawing their attention to the decoys."

"Being invisible and impossible to catch will only make my case more interesting. It would become a real challenge and then Interpol would send their best men, use their best equipment. No, it's better to be seen and then seemingly escape arrest by what seems sheer luck."

“But that will work only for so long. As soon as they find how great our impact on events really is, they will come in force.”

“True. Therefore we have to take the agency that is most eager to get me out of action.”

“How do you want to do that?”

“Easy, I will let them catch me.”

“What?”

“I will lead them to the other grotto, the one where I disintegrated the triple-T vehicle. They will see its debris and pick up the residual radiation and subsequently believe that I have been stuck here all these years.”

“But our mission...”

“Will be carried on by you and by the reinforcements that will arrive after I’ve been arrested and Watt and Krikksen will be safely gone. With the next Leonard you can move to the second phase.”

“But you are the spiritual father of our grand scheme. Other versions of you have thought about it, but only you went far enough to start it.”

“Unfortunately, I can’t finish it. Don’t act so shocked. You know this project is larger than one single lifetime.”

“I just hoped you’d remain here a bit longer, if only to assure things go well.”

“We can only push things so far. At a certain moment they should gain their own momentum.”

VII: Beyond Lies the Hub

Even through their constant partying, some people can’t help but wonder. One day this great Moor bedazzles everybody; the next day big, fat Pedro steals the show. Now who is the strongest? Wasn’t the traditional tug of war postponed until today? Well, you know, couldn’t those two...?

The notion occurred to more people, not in the least to Pedro and Yul themselves. Last evening, after Pedro had finished his tour through the streets, Yul was one of the first to congratulate him with his incredible feat. Pedro, happy that he had proved himself, accepted the compliment with a big smile. Now that he has shown the whole town not to forget their big blacksmith, a load had been lifted from his shoulders.

Then the two giants looked each other straight in the eyes with a respectful, yet also a taxing gaze. They hardly needed the interpreter to know what they wanted to do the next day. Not unsurprisingly, the interpreter was the young Watt, whose curiosity keeps him from keeping any cats at all. He ended up negotiating how the two giants wanted to test each other's strength, a friendly exchange throughout if only for the way this frenetic Flemish guy translated everything with mouth, hands and feet. Krikksen interfered only minimally, injecting tiny slices of sanity in the exchange.

Naturally, they ended up as referees. They're from Flanders, neutral, objective and mad as two hatters, complete with white rabbits, cheesy smiles and looking glasses. How much closer to perfection can you get?

So, on the last day of Carnival, there is the big match of Yul versus Pedro. It is one in three different rounds.

First round: weightlifting.

Since both Yul and Pedro had no problem with lifting the city's special rock, the manhood stone of Cádiz, something had to be improvised. So they took a strong, wooden box from Pedro's shop, put a thick rope under and around it, filled it with his heaviest tools and added horseshoes until both giants started having trouble lifting the box. Their faces become red, cheeks blow up as they huff and puff and muscles swell to bursting point.

Although with increasing difficulty, both men can still lift the box and keep it up for the required three seconds. After every round, one more horseshoe is added. At a certain moment, Yul grabs the rope, lifts and lifts, there is some extra strength left in his arms but somehow his legs can't keep up. Try as he might, the weight doesn't leave the ground.

Then it's Pedro's turn. His technique is different: instead of bending over and keeping his legs straight, Pedro sags through his knees and keeps his back and

arms straight. With him it's the other way around: his thick legs have some power to spare, it's his arms that are stretched to their limits. His arm muscles feel like snapping, but they hold. Barely, and very shortly. But enough to lift the weight from the ground for the required three seconds. Then he drops the load and jumps up in triumph. The first to congratulate him is Yul.

Second round: arm wrestling.

For this, the big conference table of the town hall is placed on the staged elevation in the central plaza, ensuring all onlookers a good view. The big chairs from the same place are barely large enough to seat the two giants. In a confrontation like this, it is vitally important that the arms of both wrestlers are placed in so equal a position as is possible in order to prevent that one has an unfair advantage over the other. Watt, flamboyant referee par excellence makes quite a show of positioning those two pillars of power. Jumping around both contestants like a living honey statue trying to evade a horde of imaginary bees he looks at both arms from every possible angle, making small adjustments in their positions. Then, in a final coup de théâtre, he jumps on the table, does a fast tap dance shuffle as if to ensure it is solid enough and takes a look down exactly above the gripping hands. Moving his head up and down first, as if to ascertain he's seen it right. His arms rise, his hands make a wriggling motion like he still hasn't made his mind up but then his two thumbs are up and he smiles from ear to ear. The crowd cheers appreciatively at this clownish performance and laughs out loud as he makes a backwards somersault from the table to the ground.

Yul and Pedro repress their amusement because the struggle is near. "On my count of four!" Watt shouts for all to hear and counts down: "ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR," and the battle is on.

With a teeth-grinding grunt, not unlike that of a bull that has just noticed a waving red flag, Pedro charges with all his might. Yul's arm bends back under this onslaught, but only about a hand width. Pedro pushes on, roaring, cheered on by his supporters. Yet Yul holds on.

Sweat breaks on his brow, his muscles begin to tremble, but he holds on.

For a while it seems only a matter of time before Yul will succumb under Pedro's ferocious attack. However, the longer it takes for Pedro's onrushing opening to gain the upper hand, the more he gets into trouble. Yul is by then not

the only one sweating profusely.

Inexorably, the tide turns and Yul slowly pushes Pedro's arm back in the upright position. For the longest of moments, both arms remain there. A collective sigh of disappointment escapes Pedro's Spanish fans as Yul is pushing his arm down, ever so slow, ever so relentless. The Moorish delegation starts making the most noise, the sound rising to a small crescendo as Pedro's hand touches the table.

Now it's Yul's turn to jump up in triumph and reciprocating the previous sportsmanlike gesture Pedro is the first to congratulate him.

Third and last round: tug of war (finally!).

The action moves to the elongated sand pit where the traditional tug of war is normally held. Watt and Krikksen draw a thick line in the sand, take ten paces from it and position the opponents on the respective spots.

Pedro lashes the thick rope once around his big belly, grips it in his ham-sized fists and plants his feet very firmly in the sandy ground.

Yul swings one loop around his waist as well, winds an extra loop around his right arm and squeezes the multi-corded cable tight. While the two giants hold the thick rope loosely taut, Watt attaches a red ribbon in the exact middle between the two opponents, right above the line in the sand.

After approving his handiwork, he steps back and signals the two colossi to stand ready. He takes his hat off, holds it out before him, watches if both rivals are truly ready and waves the blazing purple, yellow-ribboned headgear down in a sweeping gesture.

The giants pull. The red ribbon keeps hovering over the dividing line. Just as it seems to move in one direction it goes right back again. With no one getting a clear edge, the two giants dig themselves deeper in the sand and double their efforts. In what must be a first in the history of Carnival in Cádiz the whole city is silent and only the struggling moans of the massive opponents are heard.

Soundlessly, incredibly, with the separated halves furiously lashing back the thick rope rips apart. Both Pedro and Yul fall back in the sand with a dry thud. The silence remains as nobody can quite believe what they've just seen.

“How can such a thick rope break?” Krikksen whispers, dazed and confused. “Whole groups use it for tug of war. I mean: they’re strong, but that strong?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Watt adds nonchalantly, juggling his pencil-thin laser cutter. “I really wouldn’t.”

Krikksen rolls his eyes, then quickly swallows what threatens to become a laughing fit.

“OK,” he shouts to the confused crowd, that feel the irresistible urge to crack up as well. “Equal. A draw. It’s a draw!”

For the longest moment, both giants remain down. Then it seems they have trouble getting up. Slowly it is dawning on everyone: both men are trying to suppress their sniggers but fail hopelessly. Almost simultaneously they burst out laughing, Yul sounding like a neighing horse with hiccups, Pedro uttering a deep belly laugh with infrasonic overtones. The tension breaks and everybody shares in the hilarity.

Finally, the two giants rise from their pits, walk towards each other and embrace, while tears of laughter roll down their cheeks.

The roar of approval that this invokes shakes the walls encircling the city of Cádiz to their very foundations. By the way, did anyone mention it is Carnival?

The rest of the afternoon is celebrated with a spontaneous street procession. Pedro’s friends hurriedly improvise carriage-pulling gear for Yul. The two gigantic friends are pulling together the same five cars Pedro led through the town yesterday alone, but hey, haven’t they worked hard enough as it is?

The cars are filled with a colorful lot once more: this floating procession, this flotilla of flower power avant la lettre is such a success that it may become a tradition.

Of course, on the middle car Watt and the Moorish belly dancer are dancing, again. Krikksen is churning out appropriate riffs while Jorge José Jesus Juan Guadalajara is wailing his saddest wails, encouraged by the clapping and castañetting audience.

As the young detective and the Arabic woman encircle each other, Watt watches

her face intently. Passion is smoldering behind her eyes and he'd be damned if there wasn't a big smile behind her veil.

"You crazy Flaming, my oriflamme."

"You luscious Moor, you drive me crazy."

"You mean to say you aren't already?" She says with a wink.

"I can get crazier still." Is his honest answer.

"I don't think I'm quite ready for that." She whispers.

"You never know until you try. Where can we meet?"

"We can't, my mysterious muse. I already have a meeting with destiny." At least that is what Watt thinks she's saying.

"Too bad. But I won't forget this, ever."

"Neither will I, quixotic one."

They dance on, deep into the night. They never meet again, after this fat Tuesday night, but sometimes even a small beginning is infinitely better than nothing.

In a final flash of glory, the party burns its last extravaganzas.

Tomorrow is the time for fasting, of tightening belts and suppressing appetites. But who cares, tonight is still Carnival!

Emperor at Dusk, Vassal at Dawn

The older Watt and Krikksen decided to change tactics in Cádiz.

Having seen their parallel-world younger versions they didn't visit the city's officials, as another pair of strangely clad foreigners would raise too much suspicion. After a circumspect nightly errand of mounting digicams, minimikes and tracerjets around Ferdinand's quarters they were rewarded a few days later with a very interesting conversation between the king and a very impudent spy.

Their I/spy/AI monitoring all incoming data from the remote pickups was set very sensitive so alarmed them at Ferdinand's every conversation involving politics or intrigue: discussing his choice of breakfast with a servant, every fight with his wife, just about anything.

Even minding all false alarms in shifts the two detectives were getting too fatigued to even discuss setting the I/spy/AI somewhat less sensitive. Then, an overtired, apathetic Krikksen, expecting another false alarm, overheard a spirited conversation effortlessly spiking through his wall of indifference.

This was undoubtedly Leonard Yomin actively pursuing his enigmatic goal in this worldline. How hoarding Ferdinand towards a temporary truce with al-Ghalib would serve their quarry's objective—

whatever that was—baffled both detectives. Still, this conversation alone was evidence enough for Yomin's CIP-violation in this worldline. Compared to the large amount of other, similar offenses he committed, however, it was relatively minor.

In those other worldlines, parallel Universes that were nearly identical to their origin Universe, Leonard Yomin was known as under several infamous monikers as 'the whirlwind of Wall Street' or 'the annihilator of the New York Stock Exchange' or NYSE 'nihilator'.

With detailed information of his home worldline, he traveled to the past in those near-identical parallel worlds and ransacked the stock markets. Tracing their man through those worlds, Watt and Krikksen, continuously hot on his trail, deduced from the increasing mass being transported with every trans-timeline jump and the vivid transactions in uncut diamonds and precious metals that Mr. Yomin was accumulating quite a capital, a treasure to dwarf the combined reserves of all European nations in these Dark Middle Ages.

With that gargantuan financial backup in mind, his machinations between the Spanish and the Moors seemed somewhat unambitious, to say the least. He could easily hire an army large enough to conquer both Christian and Moorish Spain and not stop at that, too.

On the other hand, Leonard Yomin did not appear to be the manslaughtering kind. Chasing their prey for so long, Watt and Krikksen got a certain feel for him. The guy is sharply calculating, fast moving, slicker than an oiled eel in a

grease pit, not afraid to wreak financial havoc but stops at direct physical harm. His audacious plotting might cause secondary casualties, yet Yomin is not the man to lead armies in bloody battles. His actual goal, though, remains shrouded in a veil of mystery. Through their long pursuit Watt and Krikksen have become more interested in finding his motivations than in the actual arrest.

Now, they are hot on his trail once again. Their minimikes and digicams home in on their quarry and as he eventually leaves Ferdinand's quarters one of the miniature tracerjets the detectives placed near every exit launches a minuscule radiotracer that penetrates their quarry's clothing until it unobtrusively attaches itself to his skin. This should make it easy for them to home in on their prey. During the following days, following their quarry close with the radiotracer Yomin stays in the middle of Carnival-crazy crowds making an arrest a hopeless affair. As if it's not enough that the cheerful, unrestrained way these Spaniards celebrate their Carnival conjures up all the fantastic times they had in the 'Rio Carnival forever'-timeline. Let alone the manner in which their junior versions not only join in but play a leading role in the exceeding party spirit as well.

Still, the older versions do remember how their indulgence in Rio almost ended their careers and, with a mixture of melancholy and wisdom, refrain from their worst partying tendencies and carry on with the job. Their determination is rewarded as, a few days after Carnival, their quarry is leaving town.

Leonard Yomin is heading towards the hills between the Sierra Bermeja and Serrania de Ronda. Experience and instinct keep the two detectives from arresting him out in the open. Only when Yomin stays the night in what—according to their quantum computer's best estimate—is a concealed place in the landscape do they go there and make the arrest. True, this very same tactic may have helped Yomin's escape every other time, but locating their quarry's triple-T is becoming more important, especially regarding that a junior version of him might use it after they arrest the senior one.

The end of their long chase is near when they wake the soundly sleeping Leonard Yomin in a large, very well hidden grotto with unnaturally smooth walls.

“Leonard Yomin, you are under arrest for CIP-violations of the first kind: actively trying to change the course of history in an uncontaminated worldline...”

“Guilty.” A groggy Yomin answers.

“Unlawful use of TTT-equipment...”

“Not guilty. I made my own and your megalomaniac agency, in its delusions of grandeur, never made an actual law against making or using a privately made one, considering the astronomical odds that handed them their triple-T’s in the first place. My advocates will successfully fight this point.”

“Draining of stock markets in near-identical worldlines...”

“Never had any qualms about that. Just some more mega corporations not taking their responsibilities but bribing politicians and plundering the third world.”

“The stock market is not all big, bad companies. It could be people’s pension funds that you raided, as well.”

“Most of which also didn’t take their responsibility. They could have invested in green technologies, in ethical companies paying a fair price to the poor countries.”

“Well, that’s your opinion. What happened to all the wealth you accumulated?”

“Almost everything disappeared as my triple-T disintegrated.

Fool that I am, I stored those in the same cave as the TTT. I was away when it happened and was forced to live on my wits and the few diamonds I had along.”

“Your triple-T disintegrated? The energy released by that would have evaporated a whole mountain!”

“With yours it would. But mine had used almost all its energy with all the transworld jumps I made. You guys could recharge in our old timeline, I could not take that risk. So while I was away from this grotto, my TTT’s safety system failed. It still made this grotto about ten times its original size.”

Watt activates a radiation counter from his equipment bag. “Yes, Krikksen, the radiation I’m picking up here matches the characteristics of the residuals of a failed one.”

“So mine is not the only one that failed?” Yomin remarks, almost smug.

“None of your business, Yomin.” Krikksen says, but his heart isn’t in it. “Now indulge me: why go through all this trouble for some crazy manipulations in this worldline?”

“For peace in the long run. If differences of ideology in two cultures that have almost the same basis grow so profound over long centuries it takes a mending deep into history to show them the error of their separate ways.”

“Correct me if I understand this wrong: you are doing this to pave a better future in this worldline?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying so far.”

“We live in a Multiverse with an enormous amount, maybe an infinite number of parallel worlds. Why bother to save one while countless others go down the drain?”

Inadvertently Leonard Yomin thinks about his sister. Her body was never found under the enormous amount of debris that once was the WTC. He should know: he kept looking until the NYC firemen had to stop him by force. Swallowing his tears, he says: “That’s an argument like saying: why save lives on a single world while thousands die every day of hunger, disease and war. No, any firefighter, emergency ward nurse or flying doctor will tell you that every life counts. So also every world counts.”

The fierce glow of Leonard Yomin’s expression leaves no room for contradiction. Neither do Watt and Krikksen feel the need.

“We have to arrest you anyway. Basically, you’ve confessed.

We’ll leave the ethical decisions up to the court.” Krikksen says.

“Well, he’ll have arranged for the best attorneys money can buy, in any case.” Watt adds.

“Most probably.”

“What about our junior versions partying all over town? If they’re here then a

junior version of Mr. Yomin will be around as well.”

“Correct.”

“The way our juniors are going they’ll never get their quarry.”

“Indeed.”

“I mean, we botched up our first couple of assignments before we started getting it right. Shouldn’t we just advise them a little bit?”

“You know how our beloved boss W. always insists we follow the CIP to the letter. As I told you: in this case the letter of the law states: no unnecessary interworldline contact, each wordline to his own. So we do.”

“If you say so. So we leave this worldline in the hands of Leonard Yomin junior?”

“The regulations leave us no other choice.”

Servant of Iblis

Howard Jones

Howard Jones is a writer of heroic fantasy. Another hat he wears is that of Editor-in-Chief of the magazine, Flashing Swords. His stories have appeared in Black Gate, Andromeda Spaceways and several other venues. His tales of Dabir and Asim (of which the present story is one) belong to quite an unusual, probably unique, sub-genre – Arabian detective fantasy. The present story was first published in Paradox #5 and won an honorable mention in the Year's Best Fantasy and Horror #18. As an aside, this is the only fantasy story in this book. All the rest are science fiction.

When I received and read this story, I requested a couple of changes based on my knowledge of Islamic culture and history and Mr. Jones was kind enough to accept my suggestions for which I thank him and present this highly entertaining story to the readers.

I

“Oh, learned one, I need your help.” Mukhtar the rug merchant bowed his turbaned head. “A great calamity has befallen my family, and only one of your wisdom can aid me.”

Doubtless Mukhtar had some financial difficulty. If he sought advice from Dabir in that quarter then he sought emptily, for my master had no head for money.

Dabir sat cross-legged on azure cushions, his back to me. He did not answer immediately, and Mukhtar's eyes shifted to mine.

I returned the merchant's scrutiny. His full, well-trimmed beard was curled and streaked with two distinguished lines of gray, and the salt and pepper hair that showed beneath his turban was perfumed and oiled. He was rather too well

perfumed, in truth, for the whole of the reception hall smelt of attar-of-rose, as though a troupe of dancing girls had just made their ablutions here.

He found something in my gaze uncomfortable, and looked instead to the shelves inset into the walls on either side of my master's receiving room, each lined with books, scrolls, and curious artifacts Dabir and I had recovered in our travels.

"Speak, then," said Dabir at last.

Mukhtar gathered in a deep breath, as though he planned a long, eloquent speech. Instead, he blurted out: "An efreet hunts me!"

Dabir reached up for his chin and stroked his narrow triangular beard. "Tell me of this efreet."

"This must," said the merchant, low voiced, "remain a secret."

He glanced meaningfully at me.

"Asim may be trusted," Dabir said. "Tell us your tale."

Mukhtar bowed his head in thought, then spoke slowly. "There is, in my family, an amulet of great worth. I have it from my father, and he had it from his, and on through remote antiquity, where it was given long ago to an ancestor by an Egyptian Prince, for a deed of valor."

"I should like to see this amulet."

"I dared not bring it. You see, it is the amulet which the efreet desires."

"Why should an efreet care about an amulet?" I asked.

Dabir's head bobbed slightly. "Is there something special about this amulet?" he asked. "Something more important than its significance as a family relic?"

Mukhtar looked to his right and left, then glanced over his shoulder. There was only the curtained archway behind him, beyond which came the tinkle of the fountain, and the hidden archway behind me, and there were no windows set in the high ceiling.

“It is said,” Mukhtar declared softly, “to bring the man who owns it prosperity, and to protect him from harm. And so it has, down through the ages. The eldest son has always prospered.” He sat back on the crimson guest cushions. “It is true,” he admitted, “we do not swim in wealth, but we are always comfortable—and it is as my grandfather said—those who keep rivers of gold will drown within it.”

“Your grandfather sounds as if he were a wise man.”

“It is to my sorrow that I have no sons,” Mukhtar continued.

“God has granted me four wives of troublesome tongues and an indolent nephew. If my third daughter were but a man—ai-a, what a head for figures she has!” He shook his head. “But, as I have said, the amulet must be passed from father to son, and this the efreet knows.

Because I have no son, it demands the amulet’s return!”

I knew Dabir was interested, for his speech grew terse. “How, demands?”

“It left a warning writ in blood upon the wall of my dining room!

It promised dire things if I did not leave the amulet upon a step in one of my courtyards.”

“Might I read the warning?”

“Nay, my slaves washed it away.”

“Did you write it down?”

“No, I did not.” The merchant frowned sadly. “God forgive me, I thought at first that my nephew played a trick, for I knew he coveted the amulet. He has often asked after it, wondering where it was kept.

Then my servants began to report seeing a thing skulking in the gardens and in the halls at night.” Mukhtar’s eyes grew large. “A thing with a great, shaggy head, and gaping mouth, and clawed hands and feet. The next morning a warning was found, again in blood, outside my very chambers! My wives were frightened, but still I would not give over the amulet, and then two nights ago

my monkey, a clever little fellow from Hind, disappeared.” Mukhtar wagged his finger at Dabir. “You may think it strange, but I liked that little fellow. He was better and more cheerful company than my wives most days, and after my third daughter, my most prized possession. When he disappeared, I was sorely vexed. I hired guards, but when the efreet appeared last night they ran screaming from my home.”

“And there was a message?” Dabir prompted.

“There was. If I did not leave the amulet on the courtyard steps at sunset tonight, my third daughter, the light of my home, should be carried off as a bride of Iblis!” He wrung his hands. “If only he would carry off my first wife—”

“It was wise of you to come. I wish you had done so sooner.”

“Then you will aid me?”

“I find your troubles very interesting,” Dabir answered. “Tell me if you kept record of any of the efreet’s messages?”

Mukhtar shook his head. “I did not.”

“Does anyone else know the amulet’s hiding place?”

“No. No one.”

“Asim and I will come to your home this evening, before the sun sets. You will tell no one of our coming.”

“As you wish.” Mukhtar looked long at me. “Does your man...

does he have the stomach to fight with efreet?”

“Efreet, sorcerers, rug merchants, it matters not,” I said. “Where my master directs me, I strike.”

“I will need to see the amulet,” Dabir continued, “but it is crucial that no one else learn of its whereabouts. That is all that has kept the efreet from moving against you in more sinister ways.”

Mukhtar stared raptly. “It shall be as you say.”

“Good.”

“Naturally I am grateful, lord,” Mukhtar said, for the first time acknowledging his lesser rank with a slight inclination of his torso, “and you must forgive me if I sound improper—”

“I am not interested in your money,” Dabir said disdainfully. “It is knowledge I seek. Thus it will please me well to look upon your amulet.”

“It shall be so.”

II

Mukhtar lived in a rambling old home near the river gate. From the home's balconies one could look out onto three fountained courtyards, and from one tower it was possible to look over the city wall and onto the shimmering blue length of the Euphrates, on which ships plied their long way to Baghdad or the distant sea, their white sails furled downstream, their oars slashing foam back up. Bright was the sinking sun and brighter still was the bronze pillar of its reflection in the water. The high bluffs across the river, rich with lines of brown and crimson rock, threw long shadows onto the quays.

Mukhtar toured us through his home with pride. The household servants and his wives were curious, but Mukhtar sent all away save his favored daughter.

"It pleases me to introduce you to my eldest unmarried daughter, Kalila."

Kalila wore a veil, but I saw her smile beneath it. Hers were the eyes of an houri, wide and dark, and her skin was fine and clear. She had no curves upon her though, and I might have compassed her in one arm. She was probably fifteen years of age.

"She is fit for marrying, Lord," Mukhtar continued, "but I have not dared to part with the only one of wit in the whole of my household."

"I am honored that you would introduce me," Dabir said to Mukhtar, then inclined his head toward the girl. "Your father speaks highly of your mind—he did not also say that you were fair."

Kalila blushed, but looked at my master through her lashes in an ungirlish way as Dabir turned again to Mukhtar.

Dabir and Mukhtar resumed walking.

"Are you going to fight the efreet?" Kalila asked me.

"Yes."

“Aren’t you frightened?”

“I will know when I see it.”

“Other warriors saw it, and they ran.”

“I do not run from my enemies.”

“You have not seen the efreet.”

“You have?”

She nodded swiftly as we turned up a stair. “It has the head of a lion, with two great horns.” Her shoulders shivered.

“Do not fear, girl. Dabir and I have faced many creatures of Iblis.

Yet we live, and they do not.”

“Can you really stop it?”

Suddenly I realized the girl’s true aim, and I cursed myself for a fool. She was frightened. “Fear not, child. I shall let no servant of Iblis carry you away. This I swear.”

Her cheeks reddened and she looked down, but she was silent only for a moment. “Is your master as clever as they say?”

I answered in a way I thought would have pleased Dabir: “How clever do they say he is?”

“They say that he is so wise that the Caliph’s Hakim’s are jealous. They say some imams whisper that he is a sorcerer, or a djinn, for no man could be so wise.”

“He is no sorcerer,” I said. “Nor is he a djinn. But he is the wisest man in Dariashan, or the Caliphate.”

“Wiser even than the Caliph?”

I hesitated only a moment. “Yes.”

“Wiser than you?” The girl’s eyes sparkled.

I grunted. “My wisdom is here.” I patted my sword arm.

“In your sleeve? Is there a monkey hidden inside?”

“If wit were a kingdom, you would rule it, girl.”

At last we passed through an archway and down three wide steps and so came to the courtyard where the efreet had directed Mukhtar to place the amulet. Dabir spent long moments peering at the walls and poking about in the bushes, which were overgrown. He also walked about the circular pool where the water fell. It was some four paces wide, from edge to center, and the center itself was three paces in circumference. From the pool’s middle rose a cylindrical pillar where delicate geometric patterns were carved, worn down by the water that sprayed from the pillar’s height.

Dabir was walking back to us when the call of muezzins echoed through the city, and thus we washed and prayed with Mukhtar’s family. It was then we finally met his paunchy nephew, a fellow of brooding mien with but a wisp of a beard. He mouthed a few sullen words of greeting.

After prayers Dabir pulled Mukhtar aside and told him that he would look now at the amulet, so Mukhtar sent his servants to their quarters and his family to the harem, then bade us wait outside his offices.

We heard him shuffling around inside, and likewise heard the sounds of doors and cabinets opening.

Dabir was little more than a silhouette in the dark corridor, but I knew by the sound of his voice that he smiled. “Mukhtar walks first this way, then that, opening something here, then there, so that we might not guess the item’s hiding place.”

“He is not altogether a fool,” I agreed.

At last Mukhtar’s voice bade us enter, and so we did. Four candles burned on a wooden table, upon which rested a gleaming circlet set on red silk. Dabir approached it slowly, and I walked at his side, mindful of the hawk-like scrutiny of the merchant.

I judged the amulet valuable, though I had seen richer things. A cat with pointed ears was etched into the gold face of the amulet, its ruby eyes winking at us. Tiny, blocky shapes and pictures were written to the right and left of its whiskers.

“May I lift it?” Dabir asked.

“Certainly, lord.”

Dabir turned the precious thing in his hand. Its back side was inscribed with even more picture writing.

My master studied it, blinking little, then turned it again to its front side.

“Can you read it?” Mukhtar prompted.

Dabir’s answer was distracted. “Yes.” He did not look up. Once more he reversed the coin to study its back. Finally he returned it to the silk. The tiny eyes flashed and for a moment seemed to search our own. I swiftly made the sign against the evil eye.

“What does it say?” Mukhtar asked.

“It promises protection and prosperity for the person to whom it is given,” Dabir said. “Now. Here is what you must do. May I have this silk?”

A short time later Mukhtar made his way to the courtyard and placed a silk-wrapped bundle on the top stair. He retired to his chambers. Dabir and I waited until the stars gleamed, then slid out into the darkened courtyard. My master is a stealthy one, and together we made almost no sound before we reached the shrubbery along one wall and sat down amidst the gloom. Music from some distant tavern reached us, and occasional laughter, but the fountain’s spray drove out most other noise.

Some time passed. My master sat cross-legged beside the bush, content enough. My eyes, though, roved constantly. Dabir took note of my shifting and touched my arm.

“Watch the fountain, Asim,” he said simply.

I did as he bade, but soon regretted it. The swan and the dragon flew higher and higher in the dark sky, and the constant, soothing trickle of water lulled me almost into a stupor. The wind was cool, bearing hints of winter, but it was not chilling. I began to reflect that it would be very comfortable to stretch out across the ground and let sleep overtake me.

Of a sudden I saw lantern light at the height of the tower to which we had earlier climbed. My eyesight is keen, and I knew he who carried it after a moment's scrutiny. "The nephew," I said.

"Hmm," said Dabir, almost as though he had expected this.

The nephew crouched low, and then, after a very short time, rose and blew out the lantern. I thought I perceived him descending the stairs once more.

"We shall soon see this efreet, I think. Be ready, Asim."

I loosed my sword in its scabbard but did not yet draw it. Long moments passed, and then the water ceased its fall. There came faint soft knocking upon wood, as though some invisible being took footsteps nearby. I rose, snarling, but Dabir touched my sleeve and I crouched.

Before my eyes the back section of the fountain swung outward and a horror stepped out. The efreet was much as the girl had described. It was man-shaped and covered with shaggy fur. It had a lion's head, with two ram horns.

It paused on the threshold, listening, or perhaps sniffing the air.

Finally it stepped out onto a stone set in the fountain's water, balancing precariously for a long moment before it lumbered to the lip of the pool and stepped out. Its feet were huge, and its stride ungainly.

The creature turned its back and walked for the stairs.

"Now," Dabir whispered fiercely.

I sprinted across the courtyard, my sword a dark sliver of moonlight. The efreet had reached the bottom stair when I struck. My blade sank deep into its head, and into bone. There was little blood and no outcry.

The efreet toppled and its head rolled away.

I stepped back in wonder, for where its head had been, another had grown, a man's head. I stood watching to counter whatever trick it planned, but it did not move. I saw that the man's head was sliced deep and leaking brains.

"Interesting," Dabir said. He bent down by the efreet's head and lifted it up. He examined it for a moment, turning it this way and that, and then dropped it over his own.

creature of evil, but I knew then that the head was only a mask. He removed it.

"It is merely a man in a costume," I said.

"Yes."

"Did you already know that?"

"I knew that it was not an efreet," Dabir said. "Efreet are notoriously difficult to control, and not given to subtlety. An efreet would not patiently leave messages, or steal monkeys. At best it would have dismembered half the household as a warning."

Dabir rolled the costumed man over and we stared down at a pock-marked face with a shabby black and gray beard.

"Who is he?" I asked.

"A lackey, I think. Sometimes I wish you were less lethal, Asim."

Frequently I wished he was more forthcoming with his thoughts, but I said nothing.

He seemed to know my feelings, for he said: "right now I am thinking that our mastermind still awaits this one's return. I do not plan to disappoint him."

III

The wooden ladder inside the pillar was old, and the rungs creaked as I climbed down. A lantern sat on the old stone at its foot, near a coil of rope and some rotted timber.

I picked up the lantern and shined it into the gloom while Dabir descended, still clutching the efreet head. Moisture saturated the air.

We stood in a small stone chamber, and stone stairs stretched further down, out under the wall and toward the Euphrates. From somewhere in the darkness ahead came the steady plunk of dripping water.

Dabir put his hand on an rusted iron wheel set in the wall beside the ladder. “This must turn the fountain on and off.”

“How did you know,” I whispered, “that the efreet would come from the fountain?”

“I saw the pattern of the door in its side,” Dabir said, as though it were obvious.

I did not wish to be distracted by another of his “looking but not seeing” discussions, so said nothing.

We descended some twenty broad steps and found ourselves in a square tunnel, supported by sagging, rotting timbers. Moisture beaded on the walls, and here and there water dripped from the ceiling into pools of water that had formed in the pitted stone floor.

“We are beneath the river,” Dabir said quietly. Even so, his voice echoed. We said not another word as we walked along what must have been an escape tunnel crafted by the Persians who’d originally built Mukhtar’s ancient home.

At long last the lantern light showed ascending stairs, and Dabir bid me hand him my sword—which I did only reluctantly—and put the mask over my face. Like the efreet costume I’d donned, it reeked of sweat and dead skins. It had been designed so that one could see by looking out two slits cut into the lion’s

forehead, but my peripheral vision was middling. I had cut the feet from the costume, for I did not want my movements hindered.

Lantern in one hand, the silk-wrapped amulet in another, I trudged up the stairs. These climbed higher than those on the other side of the river, and curved gradually south. After some fifty steps I saw light ahead, and heard the chattering of a monkey. As I turned the bend I beheld a small cavern beyond an archway at the top of the stairs. A figure backlit by another lantern paced within it, and he stopped to stare at me as I neared.

“Do you have it?” he asked. His voice was crisp, commanding.

I lifted the silk, snugly wrapped about the medallion, and the man’s eyes lit greedily.

He was clearly a Persian—he had light skin, and his handsome face was adorned only with a short beard. His head was bare, but the rest of his clothing was finely wrought. The scent of his perfumes reached me even before I closed on him.

“Excellent,” he said. “Was there trouble from the new guards?”

I stepped into the room and shook my shaggy head. I dropped the medallion into his outstretched palm.

A fine gold rug hid the cavern floor, and hangings concealed much of the wall. There were green and gold cushions, and even a small brazier in one corner. A small monkey hung in a cage on the chamber’s far side, near the mouth of another tunnel or cave. Likely they led to the outside, where this one or his servant had no doubt been posted to watch for the nephew’s signal lantern.

The man quickly unwrapped the amulet, stepping near the lantern on the table, then stopped. His dark eyes glittered dangerously as he looked up at me.

“You fool! This is not the right amulet!”

“Indeed,” Dabir said, stepping from behind me. “It is mine.”

The man scowled. I lifted the efreet’s head from my own and took my sword from Dabir.

The man straightened, but his hands did not drift. He looked again at the amulet. "You are well-favored, scholar. I had heard that Dabir ibn Khalil was wise, but I had anticipated the usual hyperbole. I see now that I was wrong. You too must desire the amulet."

"I am at a loss," Dabir said. "You know my name, but I do not know yours."

"I am Amaharaziad, descendant of great Darius. Like you, my blood is Persian. And like you, I am governed by my wits."

"Indeed," said Dabir, "your ruse was very clever."

"How did you see through it?"

"Your scheme was too subtle. An efreet is not an instrument of subtlety. Furthermore, an efreet could not come within ten paces of a charm that is essentially a blessing."

Amaharaziad nodded. "You are wise. And doubtless you now wear the amulet for yourself, and I must relinquish my hopes for it forever."

"Nay," said Dabir. "It is not mine, nor yours, but the merchant's."

Amaharaziad sneered. "He is unworthy." He stared hard at Dabir.

"You disappoint me, scholar. Did you, then, take on Mukhtar's trouble only for gold?"

"Only for curiosity. Which prods me to ask what you offered Mukhtar's nephew? And how did you learn of this passage?"

"In the days before the coming of the prophet," Amaharaziad said darkly, "the fool merchant's dwelling was once my family's. And the nephew, pfah. Some are easy to buy with gold." His eyes fell on me.

"Your servant has not yet struck, Dabir."

"I would take you prisoner," my master said. "The governor will decide your fate."

Amaharaziad nodded slowly. “Well,” he said, “this, then, will do me no good.” He lifted the medallion. “Here.” With startling speed he flung it at my master’s head. Dabir ducked, and I instinctively moved to intercept it with my sword.

I missed. The medallion clanged as it fell into the stair beyond Dabir. I whirled back to Amaharaziad, who smirked. Smoke boiled from a small brass bottle he held in one hand. The fingers of the other toyed with a stopper.

I raised my arm to strike, but in less time than it takes to draw breath, a shaggy-headed creature formed in the smoke. It too had horns, and great clawed feet, but its torso was red and scaly, and its breath was foul. Its eyes burned like red coals.

Amaharaziad stepped behind it. “You are a fool, Dabir. Had you worn the amulet, this true efreet could not harm you. It is, as you said, not a subtle being, but can obey simple commands.” His voice became almost a purr. “Kill them.”

“Run, master!”

I kicked the costumed head at the real efreet and raced after Dabir. I heard the thing’s great feet slapping on the stone in pursuit, sizzling it with every step. Amaharaziad’s mocking laughter rang off the stone walls.

Dabir was fleet, and I too was swift, but I could feel the stinking breath of the efreet on my back, and took the final three stairs in a great leap, ducking my head so that I did not strike it on the ceiling.

I stumbled on landing, gained my feet in time to hear the frying stone as the efreet reached for me.

It drew back one clawed hand, howling, for I had swung. Two of its fingers twitched upon the ground.

I took the brief respite to run. Dabir was far ahead at this point, his lantern a bobbing spot of light in the gloom ahead. At least, I thought, he might escape.

But the light stopped.

Behind me I heard the efreet. Now I recognized words among its low grumbles. “I will rip your heart from your living body!”

I reached Dabir's side. We were near the other stairs, but he had stopped to press both hands against one of the ceiling joists. I understood his aim immediately. "Go, master!"

He clapped my shoulder, leaving the lantern, and dashed away. I glanced down the tunnel. There was another bobbing lantern, drawing ever closer, doubtless in the hand of Amaharaziad. Before him came a moving mass of darkness in which two red spots glowed.

I strained with all my might, knowing that at success I too would die, but grateful that my master would live. Above me the timber groaned and shifted, but did not give way.

I knew then that Dabir's plan had failed, for the efreet was almost upon me. There was no time to push against the timber, but I might yet buy a few precious moments if I took up my sword.

The thing swiped at me with its good hand, and I ducked back.

Then came a thought worthy of my master. I advanced with a flurry of strikes, and even that monstrous thing of Iblis retreated.

It howled its rage and slashed at me once, twice. I backed toward the wall, ducked, and when it swiped again it clove clean through the timber.

The ceiling joist swung down and smashed into my shoulder, knocking me backward. A cascade of stone fell between us, and the cold dark Euphrates roared in.

"Asim!"

Dabir cried out from just behind me, and a human arm clasped my waist, but then all was darkness, and I was under the chill water.

Even still I could hear a distant boiling as the water poured onto the efreet.

I was angry with Dabir, for I knew then that it was he who held me. My sacrifice would be in vain, for we both would die.

But Dabir's hands guided mine to his waist, about which I found a rope, and

suddenly we were moving through the cold wet darkness.

I realized that he was somehow pulling us forward and wished I'd had more time to gather breath.

The water gushed in, pushing us with it, but still we did not reach our destination soon enough. When Dabir pulled me from the water I sat on my knees on a stair in the darkness, returning the Euphrates I had drunk into its lapping mother.

A beam of moonlight shined down through the fountain's door to sketch the ladder and the wheel about which Dabir had affixed his rope.

"You should not have come back," I said, and coughed again. I was weak and my shoulder ached horribly.

"I would not abandon you, Asim."

I could not help coughing again, but moved away from the water with the sudden thought that the efreet might step forth. "You might have been killed."

"It was not written," he said, and though I could not see his face, I knew that he smiled.

Mukhtar banished his nephew from the house that night amidst many curses, but had effusive words of praise for us. "How," he finished, "can I ever repay you?"

"When the time comes," Dabir answered, "give your daughter the amulet—it shall profit her as it has always profited your family. Her sex matters not."

"Indeed?!" The merchant's voice rang with pleasure.

"Also, there is an honest, capable man I know who would be a fine manager for you. He is trustworthy. Hire him."

"It shall be as you say," Mukhtar said, though his voice betrayed doubt. "Does he have a head for numbers?"

"Nay, but your daughter does. Use your head, Mukhtar, and place your daughter in charge. This man shall front the business, and your daughter will run it."

“Verily, you have the wisdom of Suleiman!”

“Nay, Suleiman knew when to hold his tongue.”

I did not guess his meaning then, and later asked what he had meant.

He frowned as a man does when tasting a sour melon. “I endangered us both when I told Amaharaziad that we did not have the amulet.”

The next morning we searched the cliffs across the river, recovering the monkey and several sinister books and scrolls which interested my master over much. Also we took the head of the false efreet and the brass bottle from which the true efreet had come, and they sit still on the shelves of the receiving room.

Of the efreet and his master there was no sign, but I was still wary even as we climbed from the caves and into the sunlight. “Will the efreet return for us, master?”

Dabir shielded his eyes and looked back at me. He gestured to the waters lapping against the cliff. “Creatures of fire do not mix well with water. It is perished or returned to Iblis.”

“And took the Persian with him.”

“Perhaps. Certainly, Amaharaziad was no fish.”

“He might feed them well enough.”

Dabir chuckled. “I have always heard it said that Persians have delicate tastes. The fish may know the truth of the matter.”

The Weight of Space and Metal

Camille Alexa

Camille Alexa's stories have appeared in several anthologies including Desolate Places, Ruins Extraterrestrial, Sporty Spec, and Ruins Metropolis. She is also the flash fiction editor at Abyss & Apex.

Her stories almost always exhibit a rare sensitivity and this story is no exception.

[By the way, beginning with this story, we saunter into the all original section of our anthology.]

The muscles of my legs were deteriorating under the burden of extended weightlessness. If I looked at the calendar—which I'd promised myself fifty times I would no longer do—if I looked at the calendar I would see exactly one hundred red Xs: one for each day since we'd left Earth.

Hating myself, I knew already that when I'd finished exercising I would return to my room and open my locker. Obsessive, I'd run my finger along the columns of days on the sheet plastered to the inside of the locker door. My personal belongings, the few I needed on a voyage to Mars, were slung in small elastic nets within: little mesh hammocks for my bundled lightweight indoor clothes, my meager toiletries, the two paperback novels I'd brought for comfort's sake. Of reading material we had plenty, stored in the ship's computer. My vintage dimestore novels served as small artifacts of home, rather than any more practical purpose. But sanity is eminently practical, and the few other manned runs from Earth to Mars had proven sanity essential to a successful mission. Unfortunately, it seemed also to be one of the resources most in danger of running in short supply.

I completed my stint on the exercise machine. My legs twitched and shuddered as I unharnessed myself and rolled from the bench. Even as I hung in the air,

weightless, I panted as though I'd run a marathon. Glancing down at my legs I could tell the shape of them had begun to change. The muscles looked awkward, bunched where they shouldn't have been and stringy where they'd once been full. People used to tell me I had great legs. There've been advancements in water therapies to return astronauts' muscles to gravity-capable walking, but I was pretty sure I'd never have great legs again. I'd known from the start the voyage would change me; I'd counted on it. There were simply some things I'd prepared myself for, mentally, while others I hadn't really given thought to.

I heard Chuck's headset before he glided into the exercise chamber. His head bobbed to whatever grinding cacophony he pumped into his brain at full volume. Even past the high quality of his earphones I heard tinny throbbing sounds pounding across the small room.

He nodded at me, keeping time with the beat of his music.

"Susan," he said, by way of greeting. He drifted past me to the bench I'd just left and began strapping himself into the machine.

I wanted to say something about the hundredth day. I want to say: Hey, Chuck, maybe we should have a party, celebrate the halfway-halfway-there mark?

But he was breathing in time to the movements of the exercise machine, his head still bobbing slightly to the enraged-sounding lyrics tinnily wafting from his earphones. I watched the muscles of his neck for a moment: tense, then relax, tense, then relax.

I gripped the rim of the open doorway and pushed myself into the hall, expertly gliding all the way back to my personal quarters without having to touch the walls more than twice.

I needed to look at my calendar.

*

I refreshed myself as best I could with our shipboard facilities. What passed out here for showers and cleanliness was nothing of which my mother would ever have approved. Hardships to her would not have included going without a real bath for over a year: that would simply have been inconceivable.

But we had an excellent moisture reclamation system. The latest technological advances, and more luxurious facilities than any crew before us. I, of course, was the main experiment of this particular voyage: the first woman, the addition to the physical and psychological makeup of a manned voyage to the only other true planet Earth has ever sent her emissaries to touch down upon. I was the wildcard.

It wasn't me they wanted data on, of course. It was really the crew with me. Or perhaps it was all of us. In space, in our truncated warren-like corridors and small chambers and tinted glass stronger than steel, it was easy to feel gerbil-like. Rat-like, if one were to give proper credit to the more intelligent of maze-navigators and puzzle-solvers, rodentarily speaking. What do rats do when presented with A? How do they solve the problem of B? I could insert variables: cramped spaces, limited company, boredom, a female.

But no; none of that is quite fair. Every one of us aboard had undergone rigorous training, withstood grueling selection processes, proven ourselves worthy of the task a hundred times over. It was only the wear of the journey which made me unnecessarily introspective, melancholy. Not like Jabril; I was sure he'd been melancholy since birth.

As though my thinking of him caused him to materialize, he did.

He gripped the rim of the doorframe to prevent himself from sailing into the room. As always when he neared me, his face closed up, his eyes slid away from mine.

"Pardon me," he said. "I did not realize the room was occupied."

Before I could answer he was gone, as abruptly and as silently as he'd arrived.

I had sometimes caught him in unguarded moments. I'd seen his face when he descended from the observation bubble where he performed his daily prayers. Only then did he look relaxed, at peace.

The rest of the time he just looked wary. I felt it was something to do with me. I'd seen him laughing and joking with Chuck or Liam, but his smiles always died when I entered a room. He'd look away, find reasons to extricate himself from my company as soon as he could.

Not an easy feat on a ship which, though the most luxurious of its kind ever sent by humans through extended space, still felt little larger than a tin can after three months.

As it turned out, Liam thought a one-hundred day party was a fantastic idea. Galley supplies are always limited, packaged staples augmented with salad from little waste reclamation gardens. But there were always a couple bottles of wine tucked away at the outset.

The four of us aboard arbitrarily decided that Approximately Halfway To Mars was a special enough occasion to open one of our bottles. I suppose we were no more arbitrary in our decision to celebrate that day than we are, socially speaking, to call an eighteen-year-old schoolboy a man, or a fourteen-year-old mother a child.

Liam pulled the cork with relish, smacking his lips and making a big to-do, flourishing the special zero-grav combination corkscrew and pour pump. Chuck had become absolutely inseparable from his headphones. He no longer took them off even to socialize, though that didn't stop him from shouting conversation over music only he could hear. Liam finally pulled Chuck's plug and jacked his player into the ship's console. He turned the audio down to tolerable levels, but after even one glass of wine my head felt light and everyone seemed to be laughing too much, too loud. Is this what parties are like? I thought. I've forgotten.

The party mood had even Jabril laughing, talking animatedly with his hands as he described a new spatial relativity theory to Chuck. He sipped his water while Liam joked about his beliefs suddenly being very convenient, leaving more alcohol for the rest of us. I was embarrassed by the talk but Jabril nodded, smiling, good-natured about it.

It was rare for the four of us to gather in the same room. I hung at the periphery of the cabin, light and relaxed, one hand curled about the straw to my drinking bulb, the other lightly resting on a wall grip. I studied each of my shipmates as they talked over the hard-edged music, to which even I swayed my head in gentle half-time. All the guys had grown light beards, though when I'd first met them they'd been clean shaven. Chuck was by far the youngest of us, darkly attractive in that football-hero way some find so compelling. Liam was like an older, ruddy, masculine version of me: red-headed and prone to blushes. Only, he

had far fewer freckles than I did and considerably more hair on him. Considerably more hair. Half the nutrients in our waste-reclamation compost were probably derived from Liam's shed arm-hairs, pulled from the air filtration system.

My gaze lingered on Jabril. The others had taken to calling him Gabe, short for the anglicized version of his name. I didn't think it suited him.

His skin had a beautiful, translucent quality. His features were fine, but not weak. For the first time in my life I found myself thinking of a man's looks as aristocratic. Of all of us, he looked the healthiest after more than three months in space, and of the men he was the only one I found more attractive with his short beard than without.

He happened to look up, meet my gaze over the top of Chuck's head. I froze, mortified to be caught staring, especially when he'd made it clear he didn't much like me or want to be my friend.

He'd always been professional and exceedingly polite. But cool.

Always cool. I was surprised when he smiled at me.

I turned to fiddle with the volume control of the console, forgetting to smile back. I skipped a couple songs on Chuck's random-seeming playlist just to have something to do while the heat faded from my face and neck. When I turned again to face the others, Jabril was gone.

Liam held up the bottle, pump affixed to the slender glass neck looking incongruous, ungainly. I pushed from the wall with my toes and eased up beside him, trying to regain my good mood as he inserted the pump spout into my drinking bulb.

"Did you chase Jabril away?" I asked, attempting humor. Of the lot of us, I thought it most likely I was the culprit.

Liam shook his head. I imagined, but did not see, the tiny red hairs which would have fallen at his motion, floating off to become stuck in the ship's air filters. "Nah," he said, pointing to his naked wrist as though a watch were attached. "It's prayer time."

I looked toward the round dark circle of the open hatch, peered into the dim corridor beyond as though I could see past the curves of the ship, around corners, all the way up the stairtube to the shielded observation bubble.

I felt ignorant, but the wine and the camaraderie made me bold.

“Why the observation bubble?” I asked. “Wouldn’t it be more private in his quarters?”

Liam snorted. “Can’t see Mecca from inside a tin can,” he said.

I sucked up the rest of my wine, surprised to find it gone.

Back home, with normal diet and exercise, with unlimited air and company and movement, those couple glasses of wine would have been nothing to my system. In space, I was practically reeling.

Suddenly the music was far too demanding, the proximity of the two men unsettling, intrusive.

“I think I’ll turn in for the night,” I said. I’d never been able to shed the conventions of day and night, though they meant nothing more out there than this point on the clock and that one. I placed my drinking bulb in the rinser and closed the door.

“Bloody freaking typical!” said Chuck, too loud above the music and with an edge of anger.

I glanced at him, startled. “Pardon me?”

His fingers thrummed an angry tattoo against the edge of a food locker. “Girls. Always going for the freaking poets. What a load of crap.”

Liam placed a hand on Chuck’s arm. “None of that,” he said.

But I was confused. “Who’s a poet?”

Chuck pushed off from the wall, sailed across the room to land hard against the rinser beside me. Without looking at me he shoved his drinking bulb into the hatch, yanked his player from the console.

He fumbled for a moment, visibly angry, as he sealed the player inside his pocket and jacked his headphones in. It's nearly impossible to stomp in zero gravity, but Chuck gave it a good try as he shot into the corridor, banging his fist against the entry on the way out. If we'd had doors to slam, his exit would have been complete.

I turned to Liam. "What was that about?"

He shrugged, inserting the pump spout of the wine bottle directly into his mouth and sucking the bottle dry. He wiped his lips with the back of one big, square-fingered hand. "Just the usual," he said.

I sensed the edges of something; some incredibly, specifically male something, which loomed too large and dark for me to comprehend. Just the thought of caring about it made me tired. But one thing had caught my interest.

"Who's a poet?" I asked again.

His bushy red brows lifted like startled caterpillars. "Gabe, of course. Writes reams-worth of the stuff. Reams and reams and reams. Carries it all in that little pocket scribe of his, never goes anywhere without it."

*

Two hundred days out of Earth.

I lay in bed, resisting the compulsion to look at the calendar.

Two minutes earlier when I'd looked at the calendar we'd been two hundred days out of Earth. Ten minutes later, when I gave in, opened the locker door to run my finger along the columns of days and the little Xs I'd made over them, we were still two hundred days out of Earth.

I tried to breathe slowly, deeply. I tried to talk myself out of checking my calendar against the main ship computers to make sure I hadn't neglected a day, or crossed out two by mistake. There was never a mistake no matter how many times I checked.

I reached beneath the little sling holding my pillow in place and pulled out a tattered paperback. I had no intention of reading it; there are only so many times

a woman can read *Watership Down*, even if it has been her favorite book since the age of nine. No. What I wanted was to bury myself in the smell of the pages—the whiff of pulp, the hint of disintegrating paper.

I hadn't seen my crewmates in three ship-cycle days. Liam had become too loud, Chuck completely silent but for his headphones.

Jabril was like a calm current in an otherwise turbulent river, but so remote.

Whenever I left my cabin I felt as though I were drowning. Even the faint beeps and blips from the computer consoles pounded against my eardrums. Hearing the distant tinny sound of Chuck's eternal headphones could send me into a rage.

Breathe in.... Breathe out....

I told myself that when we got to Mars things would be better. I had to hang on for only a couple weeks more. Mars Station had been successively improved by each crew from Earth, and reports were that it had become quite cozy. At about the five-month mark I'd begun spending hours each day watching the live camera feed, alternating interior and exterior shots. I fantasized about being the first woman to land on Mars, and what that would mean. Once, I'd had some fairly definite ideas about what that would mean, could mean; for me, for Earth, for mankind. For womankind. But I seemed to have forgotten all those things. After two hundred days in space, the things which had once seemed important felt distant, unreal, while things which had once been inconsequential threatened to overwhelm me.

I shoved the book in my hand back under the pillow and fastened the slings of my bedding. I pulled a moist towel from the slot beneath the mirror and ran it across my face and neck, smoothing back my eyebrows, running the fingers of one hand through my filthy, unruly hair. I took the fastenings out and braided it as tightly as I could, knowing there was little else I could do under ship conditions.

Once we were home I intended to tell them to cut it all off. I'd have to have someone else to do it, as my muscles would be so weak after a year and a half in space I'd be lucky if I could lift my head. My bones felt hollow and weak just thinking of full gravity.

I exited my cabin, trying to force the lines of my face to smooth. I was filled

with inexplicable rage directed at no one. I was so distracted by the noisy static in my mind, in the abrupt darkness of the corridor with its meager running lights I sailed straight into Jabril.

Our heads smacked together with deceptive, almost slow-motion force.

Jabril was quicker than I. He saved me from the recoil, catching me and turning me against him in such a way that my head didn't snap back against the wall. I pressed a hand to my mouth to staunch the flow of blood welling from my split lip. A small trail of beads rolled across Jabril's shirt collar like a broken strand of tiny red pearls.

Everything drained from me: my unreasonable, unfocused rage, my roiled feelings of shame and anger and boredom and fear. I felt deflated. It was as though one accidental whack had knocked all vitriol from my veins. Some rational remnant of my brain was shocked to feel myself sobbing. Jabril folded me against him and I clung there, my tears and blood and other inconvenient fluids soaking into the soft fibers of his shirt rather than becoming messily airborne.

For the first time in weeks I felt calm. The incessant buzzing in my brain, the horrible weight of space and metal I usually felt pressing against my body, were gone.

"Shhh. It's all right. Shhh." Jabril stroked my tight-braided hair as one would a child, or the wing of an injured bird.

It was the first time I'd touched him since I shook his hand back Earthside. He was always careful not to be alone with me, even in the confines of the ship. Though there was precious little privacy aboard, and we'd lived in the same small spaces for months together, it was the first time I had smelled his skin. Up close he had the scent of almonds.

I hung like that—feet off the floor, face buried, body curled against Jabril's warmth—for what felt like an awfully long time. I wanted to stay there—hanging in that hallway, curled against his chest-

-all the way to Mars.

But eventually we began to move. Not I: I stayed as I was.

Jabril negotiated the tubular corridors, holding me against him with one arm while he used the other to push us gently from one wall-rung to the next. I opened my eyes to the clinical brightness of the small infirmary. He set me on the table and my foot automatically hooked under the rung there to anchor me. I vaguely wondered what it would feel like to live again in a place where my body was not apt to float away without my permission.

Jabril wiped tears and blood from my cheeks and neck. I studied his face, which was calm and quiet. Everything about him was calm and quiet.

“I’m sorry about your shirt,” I said, pointing to the bloodstains blossoming next to his collarbone.

He smiled but didn’t look into my eyes. He finished cleaning me as best he could and handed me salve for my lip. “It is just a shirt,”

he said.

“And I’m sorry I hurt you,” I said, pointing to the bruise forming against his temple. I hoped those weren’t teeth marks where my face had collided with his.

He laughed a little, this time glancing quickly at me with a smile.

“It’s just a face,” he said.

“And....” I wanted, but didn’t want, to say it. It did seem best to get it out then, while I felt calm and spent. “...And I’m sorry for whatever I did to offend you. I’m sorry you don’t like me.”

His smile faded. He pushed away with his foot and cocked his head at me, studying.

I felt it was the first time he’d actually looked at me since the day we boarded ship. The second time, if I counted that brief moment at the halfway-halfway party months earlier. If I’d been seeking his denial, or an explanation, I didn’t get it. Instead he held out his hand and said, “Come with me.”

If Jabril had been Chuck, or even Liam, or any other man I’d ever known for an extended period of time, there would’ve been many things to consider at such a request. With some men, those simple words would have been issued as a

command. With others, I would have heard the pleading in their voices, the hope. With the worst of them I would have probably been able to detect the underlying threat, which so often seems a subtle subtext of much of what men say all the time, probably without ever realizing.

But with him of all the men I'd met, I felt none of those things.

There was simply a hand stretched toward me, and a few simple words. I took his hand, curling my fingers under his.

If my mind had been less numb, I would probably have realized where we headed. We glided through the silent halls of the ship; past the closed door of Chuck's sleeping quarters; past the unlit corridor leading to the galley; past the door to the darkened recreation room where an old movie played, punctuated with Liam's laughter at jokes he'd heard a hundred times. We glided right up to the stairtube to the observation bubble, and Jabril set my hand on the rung of the ladder.

I pulled myself through the narrow tunnel in what even then, even way out there, felt like up. Control was crucial in those tight spaces; small, careless movements could send one face-first into protruding metal. Not fatal, and rarely with the force of our little accident earlier, but painful and inconvenient enough to make one wary after the first few blunders.

I rose up out of the stairtube into the tinted globe of impossibly strong polymer glass. Earthside, the bubble had been touted as one of the greatest achievements, one of the biggest improvements over all previous interplanetary flights. But on our ship it had come to feel so much like Jabril's room, his private study and place of prayer, the rest of us never went there. Liam preferred his movies, and Chuck was more an audio man than a visual one.

In a sling on the wall lay Jabril's prayer rug, a small roll of vibrant, thickly-woven silk. I experienced a sudden voyeuristic and what felt like totally inappropriate urge to watch him at prayer. I was suddenly envious of his devotion—his devotion to anything.

The sun was a hard, cold brightness. The bubble's shielding was designed to protect us from radiation greater than any which ever reached the soil of Earth, so far away. I couldn't even distinguish Earth from the bubble, not without orienting myself. Mars, however, seemed incredibly close. From our vantage it

didn't look red at all. A shiver of the old enthusiasm skittered along my spine. For the first time in weeks I recalled a tiny fraction of why I'd traveled all that way, so far from everything I knew, from everything which had always been me.

I turned to Jabril. "How do you do it?" I said. "How do you look at all this heavy, empty, naked space," I swept my arm in an arc, encompassing as much of the glittering, tinted dark and light as I could, "and think only of God?"

He smiled in that sad, melancholy way I remembered from our first meeting on Earth. "How do you not?" he said.

I found I had no answer.

*

Spirits were much lifted by planetfall. Chuck and Liam emerged from their cocoons, I from mine. It was an embarrassment suddenly, that we each in our private ways had gone slightly mad for awhile. I didn't care to contemplate our return journey. For the time, it was enough that we'd reached our goal. We seemed to experience a renewed sense of purpose, a newfound tolerance for one another. I'm not sure where Chuck and Liam had found their strength, but I credited my own sanity to Jabril's poetry, which he read me often in the sanctuary of the observation bubble. It was difficult for me to imagine hearing his poetry without feeling the weight of the universe bearing down upon my shoulders as he read.

We divided into two shifts: Chuck and Jabril, Liam and me.

As a crew, we'd been chosen for the general breadth of our combined talents. Most crews before us had been chosen for the intensity of their specializations. At some times I felt more the laboratory animal than at others.

Mars Station was still too modest in size and scope to accommodate more than two of us at a time. Two on the ship, two at the station. We were all excited, energized by the prospect of a data-gathering frenzy. My own pet interest was lichen farming and growth condition experimentation. I salivated at the thought of self-perpetuating sublimated hydroponics troughs near the planet surface: lichens were our best hope for establishing meaningful crops anyplace other than Earth.

We played three hands of bridge to see which team would be first to stay overnight in Mars Station. Liam and I lost two rounds quickly, and grudgingly helped Jabril and Chuck suit up for the short trip over the dune; checking, checking, rechecking each connective tube, each tank of breathable air, each open communication frequency.

Practically feverish, I watched the exterior camera feed on the tiny monitor as our crewmates left our cramped airlock and made their way across the pebbled surface of the austere alien planet. I knew we couldn't all leave the ship at once, but there was a tingling ache low in my stomach—a brief flare of envy that they had tread where I had not.

I excused myself from Liam's company, muttering something about data pods in my room. We were scheduled to spend just ten days on the surface of Mars, after two hundred and thirteen to get there, with two hundred scheduled for our return. I wanted to go look at my calendar.

As I walked through the corridors—feeling strange at dragging my body through gravity again; at having my feet tread, however lightly, upon the floor—I promised myself I would look at the calendar only once. Once, and no more.

*

It was incredible.

Everything was incredible, from the thriving lichen colonies of some of the troughs, to the feel of alien soil beneath my feet. The smile didn't leave my face for the first twenty-four shift I spent planetside, despite uncomfortable physical readjustments to even the considerably slighter gravity of Mars. It had taken months to adjust to weight-free digestion, balance, even urination, and my body protested the return of down and up.

I spent hours scanning what felt like every iota of data stored in the Station's computer: fluctuating temperatures, cometfall frequency, detection of sublimated ice, potential microbial lifesign, topographical measurements of ancient geofeatures. I was made giddy just thinking of the wealth of information to be accessed, of experiences to be had.

Liam was just as happy with his numbers, his statistics, his probability extrapolations. In the small arena of Mars Station one or the other of us often

crowed aloud with delight. The sense of eureka!

tinted the air with an almost visible presence. I laughed along with Liam, joyous, as he described the miracles encoded in what to me were dry mathematical equations. We spoke over each other in our excitement, chewing flavorless station rations as though we were fine dining.

Chuck and Jabril, whose specialties tended toward engineering and construction, spent most of their time climbing the outside of the Station; riveting, welding, affixing. I watched the exterior camera feed as though it were some reality television program, Earthside. I cheered aloud in the main room of the ship when Jabril successfully erected a communications tower on the Station roof. He lifted his arm in triumph, hanging onto the exterior ladder with one hand, waving a spanner over his head with the other. Liam came running from the other room to join in my exuberance. All those months of silence, of taciturnity, of vacillating annoyance and frustration with my shipmates—melted in the united glory and thrill of discovery. This, I told myself, is why you have come. This.

Two days later I was so surprised when Liam told me Jabril had broken Chuck's nose, I had difficulty understanding.

"Fighting?" I repeated. "Chuck and Jabril were fighting?"

Physically fighting?"

Liam sat heavily on the other end of my bench. My microscope, the lichen and microbial sample slides beside me, were momentarily forgotten. He ran his big, square-fingered hand through his red hair, shook his head. "I know," he said. "The stupid bastards."

"But..." I couldn't imagine Jabril fighting. Not because he didn't seem capable—I was sure he could outmaneuver almost anyone in a fight. Especially thick-necked football player Chuck. I tried to reconcile the disciplined, peaceful poet I knew with the image of Chuck and a broken nose. "But why? Liam, what could they be thinking?"

Liam leaned across me to toggle the switch for the infirmary video feed from the main ship. There was no audio, just a low-resolution black and white image on the screen. Liam shook his head again, rose to leave. I watched as Jabril stitched up a deep split across the back of Chuck's knuckles. Chuck had his head tilted

back, bloody gauze pressed to his nose. Already, his left eye was swelling shut, purpling. Jabril just looked tired. Neither of them appeared to be talking.

Liam paused at the hatch as though he wanted to say something.

“Liam, what is it?” I asked.

He looked me directly in the eyes. “Are you sleeping with Gabe, Susan?”

I recoiled as if shot. “No!”

Liam chewed his bottom lip, watching me. Finally he shrugged.

“Well, I didn’t think so, but Chuck did. He’s had a lot of days to conjure up some pretty graphic images in his imagination. I guess he made the mistake of talking pretty crassly to Gabe. About you.”

I was sure the heat in my cheeks, the back of my neck, the tips of my ears, would set my skin on fire. I began fumbling with my slides.

“But that’s just how guys are, Liam. It’s how guys always are, sooner or later. That’s how they talk.”

He opened his mouth for a moment, seemed to think better of whatever he was going to say, closed it. He shook his head once more before leaving the room. I turned back to the monitor to watch Jabril cutting the black thread after the tight knot against Chuck’s skin, beside the impossibly tiny, meticulous stitches.

*

“What really happened? Are you all right?” I listened to the faint hiss of the open com line, waiting for Jabril to respond. We hadn’t spoken privately in eight days; not since planetfall.

He sounded terse over the line, almost cold. “It was a stupid mistake,” he said. “A regrettable lack of judgment on my part. Let’s not speak of it again. Please.”

“But—”

“Please, Susan.”

He had used those two words so sparingly in the past, I had no response. He had never begged for anything, and I could count the number of times he'd used my given name on the fingers of one hand.

The sound of it from his lips caused an involuntary shiver across the small of my back.

Liam thought it best to switch partners for the last two planetside shifts, leaving me to spend two consecutive days in the Station. I tried not to be annoyed that the second one was with Chuck.

His headphones had reappeared for the first time since planetfall. There was still plenty of work to be done before we departed, but the tinny, hollow sound of secondhand music pulsing through the air distracted me. I turned my annoyance on myself in an effort to spur me to get things finished. I needed to catalogue and document the progress of every lichen sample in all the trays.

Supplies had to be brought over from the ship, and the few final improvements we were scheduled to make on Mars Station had to be completed in what felt like impossibly few hours.

We all ceased eating and sleeping in our mad rush. I thought of the mayfly, struggling to accomplish its entire life's purpose in just a few hours, and of the rare orchid which blooms only one day of every century. Time grew elastic for me, unpredictable in my overworked, fevered mind; some hours slipped by with a beat of my heart, while the occasional minute took a lifetime to pass.

I was beyond feeling mere exhaustion in the crescendo of desperation to get things done. I recognized strain in my crewmates'

faces. Liam looked paler than ever, with ruddy spots high on his cheeks and bluish circles under his eyes. Chuck's dark skin was ashen, almost grey. Once or twice, his hands shook as he entered data into the computer, the tremors causing him to swear and delete and re-enter.

By that last day on Mars we had our shift change routines down.

For our final transfer, Chuck trekked first over the dune to the landed ship, meeting an already suited-up Liam in the airlock and trading places. I watched on the monitor as Liam skipped over the pebbled sand toward me. Even in my

exhaustion, I smiled. There was no arguing it was the fastest way to travel by foot in lighter gravity, but with Liam the skipping seemed comical.

I helped Liam from the airlock, unfastened his helmet. We took our time double checking, triple checking all my hoses and connections, knowing Chuck did the same for Jabril in the ship across the dune. Since the fight they'd been cordial but distant—and not just with each other: they both seemed to have retreated to places Liam and I couldn't follow.

Idly, we watched the monitor with the exterior camera feed, waiting. Shift change procedure was a bit unwieldy, but with such a small crew and the need to have a partner check one's suit connections, it seemed the safest maneuver. Jabril was only halfway across the rise when he collapsed on the reddish dirt.

It wasn't a collapse so much as a slow crumpling, like a ball of tinfoil wadded in a tightening fist. Since I was the only one fully suited, Liam pushed me into the airlock without speaking, punching the release sequence into the airlock control even before the hatch shut all the way.

Nonsensically, my fingers scrabbled at the rim of the exterior door, as though I could hasten its process. I skipped in great bounds across the sand toward the bundle of foil paper I knew was Jabril.

Even with my space-atrophied muscles, lifting him in thirty-eight percent Earth gravity was doable. I battled the panic rising in my throat like bile. My bladder clamped with the thought that I might not be able to get Jabril to the ship by myself.

I scooped him onto my shoulder, lifting him in a fireman's carry. I trotted across the red emptiness, small puffs of dust rising at my every footfall. It was the first time I'd walked on the surface of this place and not felt the wonder of it. There was no room in my mind for anything but fear for the man whose curved faceplate banged jarringly against my air tank as I jogged.

I waited what seemed an eon for the airlock indicator to turn green. My breath rang inside the hollows of my suit, fogging slightly against my supposedly fog-proof faceplate. When the hatch slid aside Chuck leapt forward to roll the deadweight of the man from my shoulder. My fingers fumbled with my helmet latches, too clumsy in gloves to make quick work of it. By the time I got the thing off and gulped several lungfuls of ship air, Chuck had already disappeared

down the corridor with Jabril toward the infirmary. I shuffled after them as best I could fully suited.

Chuck had unfastened the last seals on Jabril's suit when I arrived. His air tanks lay on the floor, discarded, hoses and cables snaking from them like the rubbery limbs of an underwater creature.

Chuck began artificial respiration: breathing, counting, pumping, breathing. When he grew exhausted and fell back I took over. But Jabril's lips remained blue, his eyes closed. His heart didn't move under the pressure of my hands, nor his lungs rise with anything but the force of my breath.

Liam arrived, having taken huge risks with his solo suit-up and crossing. It took both him and Chuck together to forcibly drag me from the infirmary; from the still, pale figure laid out on its single, white-sheeted bed.

*

I cried into the night, alone in my cabin. I may have slept, I'm not sure. I do know that sometime later, when the tears had dried to sharp salty streaks on my face; when my breathing had slowed to a pace glaciers would envy; when the beats of my heart had become so drawn out, so far apart, it was as though no blood flowed through my veins at all; I rose and left my cabin.

The ship was dark, quiet. Perhaps Liam and Chuck had crossed to Mars Station to prepare it to languish in extended vacancy.

The next mission had left Earth about the same time we celebrated planetfall. In just over two hundred days another crew would be breathing the air produced by my lichen troughs, recalculating the data I had so recently entered, studying video recordings from the new cameras I'd mounted over the dry red rocks of Mars.

Barefoot, I crept through the corridor. I didn't turn toward the infirmary, nor the quarters of the other crewmen. Instead I turned down the short spur to my left, the one leading to the narrow stairtube and the observation bubble.

Planetside, the angle of the room was all wrong. It had been designed for spaceborne use. I crawled into the room, locked the hatch behind me and curled into a ball against the curve of the thick polymer glass: tougher than diamonds,

clearer than air. It was a relief to have the illusion of weightlessness again, if not the reality.

My body felt as untethered as my mind, suspended between planet and stars. I remained curled there for three days, dry-eyed, silent, ignoring Liam's pleas through the hatch to eat, to sleep, to respond.

On the fourth day I roused myself enough to unlock the hatch. Even in low gravity I was too weak to stand unassisted. I was beyond minding the indignity of being carried to the infirmary like a sick child, of being strapped to the bed for our delayed liftoff like an invalid. As engines roared and thrusters kicked, I studied the room, seeing no sign of Jabril. I wondered, but only in some dim, half-sleeping portion of my brain, how I'd make sure not to spend one minute of the next two hundred and ten days wondering just how carefully Chuck had checked Jabril's air hoses, and how I would survive the trip home without poetry.

As soon as I could, I intended to go look at my calendar, and to make the very first X of the voyage back to Earth.

Miss Lonelygenes' Secret

C. June Wolf

When I first met C. June Wolf at VCon in 2006, I formed the impression that she was a nice person. Then when she submitted her story for my earlier anthology, "SF Waxes Philosophical", I found out that she was a nice writer too. Here is C. June Wolf again, with a startling and thought provoking story.

"Why bringest thou not angels to us
if it be that you have truth?"
Qur'ân (15:7)

Rosaleen Kincaid sat back comfortably in the orange chair, drink in hand. With a gesture to the air before her, she brought up the words of the letter, gold-black and steadily suspended against the background of the room. Resting her arms against the chair she read:

*Dear Miss Lonelygenes,
My friends tell me that you are the one to talk to for phenotypic-profile counselling.
I have been single—by choice!—for thirty-some years since first beginning to date, and I think it is time for me to settle down. At fifty, I have the maturity to raise a fine, well-balanced family, and I have the funds to do it as well.
But first, I need your help in selecting a mate.
I am submitting a sample of my genomic DNA and a copy of my environmental pedigree for your perusal. Please note in particular the entries under class and medical history, and do let me know if I have not supplied everything that you need.
Yours truly,
Destina Fairhammer*

Rosaleen looked away from the letter and the DNA map glowing softly before her. She sighed. "I have the maturity, and I have the funds ..." Self-satisfied nob.

She glanced through the woman's particulars. Her basic genetic profile was a fairly common one. Even the more interesting bits were not unmatchable. It wouldn't be difficult to draw up a selection of potential mates, to make her next of kin as close as possible to herself.

Some rebels still went for the Distant Cousin types, and others for the Complete Stranger. But all in all, the smug little women liked their men—and the smug little men their women—as much a mirror of themselves—or at least, of their image of themselves—as they could get. Less friction that way. Less need to accommodate. No incentive to change.

Rosaleen stirred herself, as if waking. Her jaw muscles were bunched; she loosened them deliberately. Took a long draught of the amber, aromatic liquid in her glass, and gazed out the window at the jungle growing on her balcony.

Here she was, Miss Lonelygenes, helping to build a middle class as stolid and self-referent as Her Mother The Famous Geneticist's worst nightmare, and, for an exorbitant fee, an upper class yet more dire.

For the rich, the pipettes were at the ready, sucking out unwanted differences in their intended's DNA, streamlining his or her phenotype to the desired fit. That done, the less wealthy fiancé/es'

were regrown. And while their bodies were being thus perfected, they were saved in live-holo format, to be blended into their new forms when the work was done. The couples joined thereby countless other Islands of Indifference—those Mother had warned against—oases of certainty in a suspicious world of chance.

Rosaleen hated them all. But luckily, she hated her mother, too.

Thus avoiding any huge conflict of interest in betraying that woman's ideals.

Uncurling herself from the orange chair, she walked slowly to her bedroom. Glass doors melted away as she approached them, their molecules knitting silently together again when she had passed through. Inside, her bed opened to her, pre-warmed and accommodating, surrounding her in its mild, sweet-musk smell and calming-pheromones. Rosaleen settled down in sad surrender, her hair a red tangle on the pillow. She closed her (all natural) brown eyes and waited for dreams to come and ease her unhappiness away.

When sleep arrives, he is there. A man she has seen often before, an Egyptian who passes her in the gym and never talks with her, no matter how sweet her smile.

“Why won’t Naseef speak with me?” she had asked her gym-buddy, Heba, who was Egyptian, too. Maybe she could guess.

Heba replied, “Naseef is very devout, unusually strict. Canadian values haven’t really stuck to him. A Western woman like you isn’t even on the map,” She took a closer look at Rosaleen’s face. “Oh, you’re kidding! You want him? You’d never stand a chance.”

So Rosaleen had forgotten him. Pretty much. Many, many other fish in her deep blue sea. Although Heba had passed on bits and pieces from time to time. Naseef had married a distant cousin. Yes, many many other fish.

The dream shifts. There is Naseef, sitting alone on a park bench.

She stares at him. Handsome face, astonishing green eyes and glossy black curls. He is waiting for something, or someone.

As she watches, a deep sorrow arises in her.

She crosses to stand in front of him. He rises from the bench and faces her. His body is slender and strong; arms loose at his sides. The warmth coming off him is unbearable. She wants to let her knees fold, pull him down next to her on the grass.

Her surroundings change again. They are at a child’s birthday party. The children are all blonde and perfect—and they get along so well. Their parents are in the background. Rosaleen thinks, ‘I should know these people ... ’

And then she does. That one is Destina Fairhammer. Her husband laughs gently into her ear. They have a habit of stroking each other’s hands that would have driven Rosaleen nuts. The other adults are clingy and soft as well, the children, dazzling blonde and softly touching, touching, touching ...

Naseef is hot and dusky in comparison. She herself is a ruddy sun. He says something to her, oblivious of the others, laughs heartily at his own joke. She grins, places her hand on his. At last, he is here ...

The gaze of the others falls upon them, sternly, their eyes asking: what are these two doing here? What are they doing together? And suddenly she freezes in fear—of them, of Naseef, of her own foolish desires.

She can never have him. Can never hold his wiry body in her hands, never slip her tongue inside his mouth ... “Naseef! “ she murmurs aloud.

Rosaleen started, uncertain what had awakened her. After a moment, she relaxed, pleasure and unease mixing. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed a misplaced shape in her room, and flamed with anger. That damned preep!

The non-living, infuriating, Personality-Preprogrammed hologram of her mother, Ellis Kincaid, uncrossed its legs and leaned forward. It was seated in a clothes-strewn chair, and its expression was dark.

What are you doing? It hissed. Rosaleen sank beneath her bedsheets.

“Go. A. Way, “ she ordered the vision.

Had her mother been smarter, she would never have made the preep—and never tied its continuing presence in Rosaleen’s life to the substantial inheritance her mother had bequeathed her. The preep was Ellis Kincaid’s personal golem, arising at every occasion to twist her daughter’s psyche, shame her into wiser choices, ridicule her into uprightness. If her mother had left her, Rosaleen was sure, to mourn and to forgive, to see her own mistakes along the way, she might have actually gotten somewhere with her, albeit long after Ellis had crumbled into dust. Unfortunately, Ellis trusted no one but herself.

It is wrong ... the preep hissed again. Hissing seemed to be the vocal tone of the dead, if EllisPreep was to be trusted as a model. You thwart my work by making a mockery of it. You were a good scientist, Rosaleen—a good person. You know what benefit could be undertaken with this knowledge, but you squander it. And lead the world a little further into hell.

And now this. What on earth are you thinking of? Have you no self-respect, no respect for this man, his culture, for anything? What are you planning, you slut?!

“It is a fantasy, Mother, “ Rosaleen spat back, sitting up and glaring at the preep. “A dream, all right? Something that is NONE of your business!”

A fantasy? Nothing more? You expect me to believe you? Every sick thought you've ever had you've followed up. Every nasty little subterfuge and evil intent — "Shut up! I'll tell you what I expect! I expect you to stop barging into my life when you're not wanted. You aren't even my mother!

You're one of her bad moods, trapped in a hologram. She didn't want to die, didn't want to leave me—she didn't trust me to live my own life. But you aren't her! Don't you get it, Preep? " She sat up again.

"If you were my mother you'd have moved on from this by now!

You're just an endless loop, and you are driving. Me. Insane!

"Now would you please do the right thing and self-destruct? "

Rosaleen fell back in a rage and buried herself in the bedding.

The preep's dire admonitions were little muffled by the sheets.

Tomorrow, by damn, she really would delete the wretched thing.

#

Miss Lonelygenes never met in person with her clients. It was better that way.

Using holos gave her customers sufficient distance to express their desires openly, and allowed Miss L to mould her answers to suit each individual, to make her outgoing holo resemble each of them in some way, in order to put them utterly at ease. Thus it was that she emblonded and petited and touchy-feelied the image of herself that reached out to Ms. Fairhammer's room that day.

Her mother's preep had retired the night before after a zestful upbraiding which Rosaleen had refused to further respond to. After a time of cluttered silence, she'd fallen asleep, her bed removing bit by bit the rigid tension that had resulted from the visitation.

Rested, fed, she was up for anything now, and the holo-illusional lift of her breasts was matched by a perkiness of attitude that Destina would feel instantly comfortable with.

Rosaleen had no doubt that she would find Miss Fairhammer's Perfect Spouse within the week. All she needed was a little more information and a contract signed. Destina herself, when she answered the call, exuded delight. The meeting went smoothly, as they always did.

"And you, " Destina asked at the close of the interview. "You are happily married, I expect? " She chuckled.

Rosaleen smiled—a touch proudly. "Mr. Lonelygenes— " they laughed— "is everything I could ever have wished for. We meld perfectly. " She let her eyes half-close as she glanced downward and to the right, smiling—a pose that she understood spoke of the intimacy of friends, a privacy about to be revealed—and carried on.

"I was my first customer, and I always guarantee satisfaction! " They laughed again.

Destina went further. "Your mother was the scientist who perfected phenotypic profiling, wasn't she? "

"Indeed she was. Ellis Kincaid. It fetched her a Nobel Prize. "

"Oh! You must be very proud of her! "

Rosaleen nodded, smiling brightly.

"And she of you—what you have built on her foundations! "

Without skipping a beat, Rosaleen beamed and demurred. "I've only done what anyone would do. It's my small attempt to build a better, more harmonious world. Mother would be satisfied with that."

"Would be? Oh, poor dear!"

"It's all right. It's been many years ..." They glided away from the topic and to the conversation's end. Not before, of course, Destina Fairhammer's golden signature wrote itself in the air in front of them 149

both, and simultaneously in the offices of Belcher, Small and Lindt, and of Harmen and DuBois.

#

That evening, Rosaleen left her apartment wearing a midnight blue jacquard cocktail dress and skimpy organza coat, and carrying a large handbag. She stepped into the waiting driverless cab and arrived at the Twin Vines by eight forty-five. She paid in code and watched as the car zipped away along the wet street, then went inside for a drink.

Couples were filing in and out of the trendy place, seeing and being seen. Each one seemed matched in every way—physically, temperamentally—where not identical, they were carefully complemented. Singles summed each other up in a glance, quickly dismissing candidates that seemed too unlike themselves.

Rosaleen had a slow drink, watching the phenomenon. She guessed at which pairs had done the matching themselves and which had gone to professionals; she could generally tell. The ones too focussed on the visuals were homemade jobs, for example. She doubted those relationships would pass the test of time.

Speaking of which, time was wasting. Rosaleen had the bartender make a call and stepped outside a moment later as a second cab pulled up.

Behind her receded the townhouses and well-kept streets. The cab passed out of the downtown district and entered a shabbier commercial zone. Here, snow was not absorbed but scraped from the street by vehicles that left great piles of it along the curbs. Rosaleen had the car pull up in front of a darkened doorway. She paid the cab in cash—a feat of patience in itself—and emerged in slacks, a vest and a cloth coat, still carrying the bag. Rosaleen navigated across the humped snow, and, pushing her way through a scratched, red-painted door, went inside.

The bartender greeted her. “Hey! Rosalita! How you doin’ pretty thing? “ Robert was always there, glistening and round, wiping down the bar or making up a drink and eavesdropping with undisguised interest on the conversations around him. “Come on in—what can I buy you? “ he asked.

This was how it always started. Rosaleen in her slumming clothes, a tourist in the neighbourhood her mother had grown up in.

She would chat with Robert or sit alone, drinking and thinking and giving nothing away. The idea sank her slightly; she could feel the bilge sloshing

against her insides, cold, oily harbour waters nosing across her deck. Although the preep had not followed—could not follow her here—still she could imagine her mother, sitting upright in 150

the adjacent captain's chair, staring at her. Now here you are, the imagined mother said, getting ready to prey on innocents. Rosaleen pitched slightly on her stool.

“Rosalita! What's the matter? Get up, girl, you're scaring the customers. “ Robert joked but he looked concerned. How was it the only person in the world who cared if she was about to fall over in a faint was a barman she barely knew?

Brushing her hair out of her face, she blinked. “I'm not feeling so good, Robert, “ she said. “Maybe I'd better sit at a table tonight. “

“Yeah, sure, sweetheart—take one over there where I can keep an eye on you. That guy in the corner is hitting on everyone in sight, and he is a c-reep. “ She glanced at the guy. Robert was a doll. The creepiness of the man in the corner wasn't immediately apparent. She might just have fallen for the bait.

Rosaleen made her way to a table with Robert's help, and sat sipping her rye. What had happened just then—a fainting spell? More likely the beginnings of a nice psychotic break.

She recovered gradually, looked around with more interest. Some regulars chatted over beers, others played fozzball and pool or crowded around a single gaming-holo, goading each other playfully along. Across the room, three women sat talking, one very thin and one larger and the third with the grand girth of a queen. The queen was Hispanic and the others ... Around here, probably Ugandan, but who could tell? Rosaleen loved that she didn't know.

She sipped a little more rye, continued scanning the room. And there he was, in a darkened corner, Fresh Off the Boat from—what?— Vietnam? He was keeping to himself, his drink close to his chest. He was young and pretty and with luck he didn't know a soul. No buddy to come in and distract him.

Rosaleen could feel herself warming up. Mhmmm. A little unprotected sex to even out the day ... What would MotherHolo make of that when Rosaleen came home?

#

Miss Lonelygenes sat down at her workspace—the orange armchair—and called up the file on Destina. It glowed in the air in front of her as she pondered it. She began running through the offerings the data bank had given, tweaking them. By the end of the day, Destina would have several potential dates, and from there, the family planning could begin in earnest. As she worked, Rosaleen grew relaxed and satisfied. Drowsiness crept in. Silly her. Back too late last night. She rested her eyes for a moment, and her mind. She began drifting into sleep.

Someone was staring at her. Naseef. Heba's latest news was that he had divorced his wife—Muslim, but too Western after all—and gone back to Egypt. Now Rosaleen wore a pretty, modest, apricot-coloured dress, a shy expression in her downcast eyes. She was his new wife. It was their first moment alone. They had not yet touched.

God, he is hot, thought Rosaleen. Naseef took a step toward her. She smiled and breathed deeply. At last ...

She jerked out of her reverie. Whoo. Sexy little naps during worktime? Even she didn't approve of that.

But Naseef Hossein again? She thought she'd let that go. It hadn't been such a big deal, a passing craving, that was all. And she had little Hien from Robert's bar—she grinned at the memory—and all the others she could handle. Why had she grown so fixed on Naseef?

She thought about it. Naseef was not the most beautiful man she'd seen, though he was handsome. He was easy-going and laughed with his friends; his eyes had much sweetness in them—when they weren't terribly serious. She had heard him speak fluent English with men he had befriended, and she had liked what he had to say. But still, he would only nod at her, despite her cheery, "Good Morning! "

month after endless month—only nod, and never stop to chat. What was the big draw in that?

He isn't for you. And now he was in Egypt.

Oh, damn!

The preep strolled into the room. Listen. Very carefully. I know why you want this man. You want him because you can't have him.

You want him because I don't want you to have him. You want him because you want to make a fool of yourself in order to make a fool of me.

It was in full hiss mode again.

Rosaleen hadn't after all summoned up the heart to delete EllisPreep. She just couldn't wrap her mind around the finality of such a move. It wasn't her mother, but it was all she had left of her, and she wasn't quite ready to give her the final boot.

The hissing kicked up a notch.

Ignore it, Rosaleen, she told herself. IgNORE it.

And has it ever occurred to you that those men you play with at Robert's bar are just as important as you are? That they have lives and hearts and complex social contexts and that your games might not be the best thing in the world for them? Does that ever occur to you?

IgNORE it, Rosaleen ...

You think you want him. You don't even know him! Why don't you hire yourself, for God's sake? Find a man who actually wants a woman like you? Make yourself happy for a change, have a real relationship, stop fooling around with other people's lives.

"God! " Rosaleen cried. "She really did a number on your program, Preep! Admit it! Ellis would have had me regrown if she'd known how to do it! You hate me, not my methods—you probably hate yourself, too. You're not so bloody pure of heart! Now if you don't leave me alone I'll— " she hesitated. The preep smirked. "— I'll kill myself! " The smirk widened into a smile and EllisPreep burst out laughing.

"Look! " Rosaleen continued, "Has it ever occurred to you that maybe it's my genes that are up to something? " EllisPreep raised an eyebrow. "Or that maybe putting up with you and my self-obsessed customers has gotten to me on some physical level? Maybe I'm the one who needs out of this over-regulated hell.

Can you even imagine that? “ She clenched her fists in frustration. “Maybe Naseef looks good because he is good. Maybe I need to make a baby that’s completely different from me and everything I ever knew in order to bring something precious back into my life. Maybe I have no choice in this! “

The preep stared, a pitiless look on its face. And who is responsible for this over-regulated hell?

Rosaleen slumped in her chair. “Oh, you can’t blame me for that.

Lots, but not that. Am I responsible for xenophobia now? “

What did I want to do with the phenotypic profiling, Rosaleen?

“Go away. Please, “ she whispered, “just go away. “

What else could you have done with the power to read people so utterly, the power to change them on the minutest levels—what good could you have done with such a thing?

“Right. What could I have done? The mind simply boggles. “

Rosaleen rested her forearm across her eyes. “Maybe, Mother, I don’t want that kind of power over other people’s lives. Maybe I don’t want that much power over my own. Maybe I just want to set my boat adrift, without a compass, without an oar, and see where I land. “

And you think that’s what you’re doing? You bloody fool.

Rosaleen felt weak. “Go, “ she said, in a barely audible voice.

“Please, for God’s sake, leave me in peace. “

And, for the moment, it did.

#

Rosaleen tended the balcony plants. Tropical in origin, generous in growth, they swayed gently in the breeze coming off the frozen lake, a breeze that was continually warmed and moistened at the perimeter of the balustrade. She

trimmed unwanted growth, plucked bruised leaves, tested soil chemistry. On her knees in front of a particularly handsome bromeliad, she asked herself—or rather, she asked the bromeliad—The Question.

Why didn't she? Why didn't she just do the test, find the match, take the plunge? Someone must be out there with the same hopes, tolerances, aspirations as she. Why did she crave the unknown, lust for something so unlike herself? Was it as simple as Ellis made it sound? Was she just jealous, just looking for revenge? Somehow she suspected that Ellis herself had injected her with this desire; set her up to long for someone like him.

Was she nuts, or was it just good genetics? While she was out finding the well-heeled lovelorn their perfect matches, depleting the pool of vigour and growth, perhaps her own genes were forcing her toward a desperate mixing of the blood. Was that idea crazier than any other?

Then again, maybe it was just perversity. Knowing that she was too great a traitor, too awful a person to deserve anything good, and knowing that she ran no risk that he would ever have her, he was safe to want. "Is that it?" she asked aloud.

The bromeliad said nothing, naturally. The breeze played kindly with her hair, petting and twisting the strands gently in its grasp.

There must be something she could do.

#

Dear Miss Lonelygenes,

The letter glowed in front of her. A motionless, image-only holo of a young Semitic woman was suspended next to it in the air.

I know there is little point in my writing to you.

Neither I nor my family are wealthy and my needs are great. Still, I hope you will understand, and take pity on me.

My family is from Egypt. Very old and very traditional. But I grew up here, and I don't think like them. I'm like my friends in school. I have the same dreams,

the same habits. I've never taken an interest in Islam, and have had many arguments with my parents and my brothers and sister over this and other things. They want me to be more traditional, maybe even to wear the hignab, but definitely to embrace Islam and marry a good Muslim man. For my cousin Ruqaiya, this is fine.

She feels no conflict between her life as a Muslim and being a Western woman. She is a doctor and her husband is as well. I'm almost envious of her.

But I can't be who they want me to be. I do want to marry—that's why I'm writing you. I want to marry a man who is more like me, who understands my attachment to but also my rejection of the traditions of my family. For the sake of peace he must be Muslim. If I can find him, my family will accept him, and I can relax. If I can't, my heart will be completely broken, and my family's, too.

Please, can you help me? If there is anything I can do to persuade you, anything I can promise you for the future when I have money—please, please. I have been searching in every other way, but I haven't found him, and the walls are closing in.

Thank you, Miss Lonelygenes. I know you will understand.

Rania Hossein.

Rania. Her face was strongly familiar. From a while back ... She peered at the young woman's holo. The green eyes were afraid, beneath their stubbornness. Afraid, and so familiar ...

As she looked, the image transformed into memory. Naseef!

Naseef Hossein! The eyes, the cheekbones, the fire within. It had to be. Her heart leapt. This was her way to him! A coincidence maybe, but then who else would the young woman have turned to?

So, Mother—what do you think of that?

#

One year later, Ms. Rania Hossein left her parents' home for the last time. Two hours after that, she let herself into the newly-empty apartment of Miss

Lonelygenes, using a new code known only to herself.

She looked around approvingly, placing her single bag of treasured possessions carefully down beside the door. Her prayers had been answered—beyond belief.

She unpacked a handful of framed photographs, brushed a light layer of dust off them with the side of her hand, and arranged them around a willowy vase on the sideboard. Her family, her friends. They smiled and giggled and looked solemnly out at her. She blinked twice quickly and turned away.

Rania settled down to learn whatever else she needed to become the new Rosaleen Lonelygenes. Eventually, she would go back to her former studies—reclaim her dreams, although how she could reconnect with her friends she could not imagine. But there was a lucrative living to be had here. It wouldn't do to change everything in the Lonelygenes enterprise too quickly. And who knows? She might get used to it.

Rania—that is, Rosaleen—sank onto the orange armchair and called up the familiar background files, listened and read and memorized till her back and mind grew weary. At last, she retired to the balcony, which was tropically warm and softly humid.

“This, “ she thought, “I'll definitely keep. But the living room ... “ She turned to appraise the old Lonelygenes' tastes. “That, I think, will need a little work ... “

Rosaleen had warned her about the preep; she was prepared for it.

But it never manifested itself, and in not too long a time, she forgot all about it.

#

A half day after the woman who had been Rania moved into her new home, the former Miss Lonelygenes, now Ms. Rania Hossein, arrived in the form of a live-holo projection and a small transceiver in the international live-holoport in Cairo. At her request, her family was sending her to live with relatives in the old country. Her relatives, distant cousins on her father's side, had never met Rania. Uncle Sherif had not had the money to send his children home to Egypt before.

Rosaleen's holo was amended perfectly. Not even Rania's mother would question who this was. Meanwhile the body which had been Rosaleen's lay in a

laboratory back home, being slowly regrown to resemble exactly Rania Hossein.

But now Naseef stood before her.

When the new Rania had first written to her distant cousins in Egypt, this was what she said to them. “I have grown up in wild, foreign ways, but am now eager to begin anew. I want to be taken into the heart of Islam, of my Egyptian family, to learn my rejected history, my spurned traditions, to find God closer to me than my jugular vein.

I want to be what I was born to be, instead of what I have become. “

They were moved by her words, not least of them Naseef, and in the course of writing back and forth, they had grown to long for her as she longed for them.

It was like a homecoming, this meeting at the holoport, and her family in North America was filled with joy at their Rania’s awakening. In a year or so, when there was enough money, and they were sure she would be successful in her new life, they would arrange to send her body, too. It would be awoken from its slumber, and the live-holo switched off for good. For now, Rania watched Naseef accept her transceiver from the airline attendant. She thought she read in his eyes the stern affection of a young patriarch, mingled with pride in her bravery, and awareness of the challenges she faced.

Rania looked back at Naseef and her new family, many feelings abroil in her. Naseef stood with two of his brothers and their wives.

Their sister Aliyah, who had corresponded eagerly with Rania, stood behind them with her mother and grandmother; children of various heights gathered close to their parents, staring at the bright image of the young woman in pink higab, grey skirt and blouse. Aliyah beamed and held Rania’s gaze. There was the look of an imp in her eyes.

“Assalaam Alaikum, “ Naseef said. “We are so very happy to welcome you, Rania. “ Everyone nodded; Aliyah’s head bobbed with delight.

The former Miss Lonelygenes lowered her eyes, and felt her projected body purr with the live-holo-supported nearness of Naseef, but also with a subtle buzz of fear. Could she do what she had set out to? She could never go back now. Doubts reeled in her as they always did. But she must be able to do it—of course she

could. She had come too far to let fear defeat her. She would learn to be anything she must.

When Rosaleen—Rania—lifted her eyes again, she took in the whole family. Their open expressions and welcoming smiles warmed her. Maybe she wasn't completely crazy. Maybe it wasn't just sex, or genes, or shame or self-punishment. Maybe it was a very good thing to do, as she tried so hard to believe. A family, a people, a Way to follow—at last. Maybe (she smiled inside to imagine such a thing) Naseef's Allah had led her here.

For a moment, she didn't care about the child whose genes she wished Naseef would give her. For that moment, she wasn't concerned about Naseef or herself at all. The beauty and promise of the people before her washed all foolishness away.

Then, at the back of the group, Rania noticed the old woman in black regarding her. She alone was unsmiling. She gazed skeptically at the new Rania. With that so familiar look.

Oh, Mother, thought Rosaleen.

Recompense

Pamela Kenza Taylor

Pamela Kenza Taylor says this about herself: “I’m a stay-at-home mom/freelance writer/author. While I make a living at journalism and op-ed, my first love is fiction, particularly science fiction. I also write poetry, mostly of a religious bent.”

Jeremy Hawkins, second mate of the Adeline, stood at the larboard aft rail of the poop deck, letting the warm August wind ruffle his hair. The moon, waxing gibbous, reflected on the waves in glorious tones of pearl and silver, dappling the black water in a spectacle that surpassed even the beauty of the Celestial River.

“‘Tis a magnificent night,” came the voice of first mate, William Gossett, as he climbed up from belowdecks to relieve Hawkins of the watch. “I shouldn’t wonder if your berth seems not so welcoming this morn.”

“I’d string up a hammock and bed down here with this fair breeze freshening my slumber, if the captain wouldn’t have my head,”

Hawkins replied. Gossett nodded, his grizzled hair gleaming in the moonlight, his crooked smirk deepening the lines in his weathered face.

“Ay, the stench below is something fearsome, but the captain’s wrath is doubly so.”

“I never suspected they would smell so.”

Gossett guffaw cut Hawkins short.

“Ha! What were you carrying? Tobacco? Cinnamon? You blasted merchanters! Rosewater sailors all, the accursed lot of you!”

Hawkins bore the banter genially, knowing Gossett meant no true insult. Even if he did, Hawkins was no match for the old salt, with fists or cutlass.

“Cotton, mostly. Sometimes lumber.”

“A waste of a good ship.” Gossett spat into the Adeline’s wake.

“Slaves. That’s how you make real money.”

Hawkins remained silent. He’d signed on with Captain Bayonne three months ago for that very reason. The second mate’s share of the voyage’s profits would make life quite a bit more comfortable for some time to come. With his upcoming marriage, wealth had seemed important at the time, but he’d soon found that he had no stomach for the trade in human cargo.

The horrific reeking of hundreds of stark naked, unwashed bodies, packed together like olives in jar, pickled in their own urine, feces, and vomit, was nothing compared to the piteous wailing of the negroes for a bite of food, a breath fresh air, a drop of water, or relief from the hellacious heat, though, truth be told, their heartrending shrieks were preferable to the desolate silence that had becalmed the ‘tweendecks in the past week.

Worse even than the conditions of the hold was the vicious cruelty of the slave driver and his team as they brought the captives up for their paltry rations, forcing them to “dance” in their shackles till their ankles bled so that their muscles wouldn’t waste away, hurling the most ill overboard, screaming in terror, so they wouldn’t sicken the other captives. Then they were all packed back into the putrid holds for another twenty-two hours, or longer if there were a storm. No wonder trading in slaves was illegal. If he’d only known three months ago what he knew now.

A lusty splashing erupted into the silence, and the two men peered over the railing into the inky waters. Thousands of small, silvery fish were leaping wildly from the briny waves, swimming madly to the northwest, pale scales flashing in the moonlight like so many miniature lanterns.

“What in tarnation!” Hawkins exclaimed.

Gossett scowled at the churning water. “Tis an evil omen, if ever there were one. Wake the captain. And shake up Caruthers, too. Tell him to sounds the depths.

We'll not be foundering on some wretched shoal on my watch."

Hawkins resisted the ingrained urge to salute, ran past the helmsman, and down the steep companionway to rouse the captain and Caruthers.

By the time he described the eerie occurrence to the captain, located Caruthers' berth, and returned to the poop deck, the fish had ceased their frantic leaping. The waves rolled smooth as glass. The moon had set, and the wind had dropped to the gentlest of breezes.

Aside from the luffing of the sails, there was no sound to be heard in the darkness.

Hawkins released a shuddery breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. The heavy silence loomed ominous after the wild frenzy of the fish. It made his palms sweaty and his flesh creep.

"I don't like it," Gossett growled. "Watch them waves. The moon didn't have no halo last night, did it?"

"No, it was perfectly crisp and clear."

Gossett uttered a rough grunt, and then commanded, "Watch the sunrise too. Look for red rays, or clouds the color of blood. Perchance there's a hurricane a-brewing. I'm going amidships to see to Caruthers."

Gossett stomped off, leaving Hawkins and the helmsman alone on the poop-deck.

"So much for Gossett manning the morning watch," Hawkins grumbled to himself. He doubted he get a word of appreciation for standing extra hours, from Gossett or the captain.

The helmsman, a tall Swede by the name of Olav Johansen, turned to Hawkins

"Chief mate's spooked, ain't he?"

"He's just conscientious," Hawkins replied, wishing he felt as assured as his answer sounded.

“Conscientious like hell. He’s spooked. Fish jumping. Wind dying. We’re bound for blazes.”

The man turned back to his wheel, though he had little to do as the Adeline had begun to slow under the idling wind. Unless it picked up again, they’d be becalmed by sunrise.

Light was already streaming heavenward in the East. A few golden clouds floated lazily above the horizon’s curve.

“Chirk up, lad, looks like a beautiful morning to me,” Hawkins called over his shoulder.

“Best be offering a prayer to St. Peter.”

Captain Bayonne and the chief mate came up onto the deck, a heavy scowl on the Captain’s face.

“You lily-livered, motherless son of a bastard, wake me afore dawn for the sake of a few mad fish? I’ll teach you to disturb your captain afore first light!”

“They was fleeing the Adeline, I tell you. Then the wind deserted us, too.”

“Seems to be fine now,” the captain snarled.

And indeed, Hawkins noted, the wind had picked back up again, though it remained light.

“The man who dares wake me again this morn will have his own tongue served to him for breakfast!” the captain declared, glowering at the three men on the deck.

“Aye, captain,” they replied hastily.

After the captain had left, Gossett gave Hawkins a slap on the shoulder.

“The depths are aright. 230 fathoms. The winds comin’ back.

Mayhaps we passed over a shallow spot, but we’re in the clear now.

You’d best be hitting your bed. Take an extra hour; I’ve eaten up half a watch

with this tarnal foolishness.”

Hawkins threw him a grateful salute as he hurried below. The stench might be horrendous, but he was exhausted.

Hawkins collapsed onto his berth, expecting to sleep as soon as his head hit the pillow, but Gossett’s superstitions badgered his thoughts, making every creak of the hull seem portentous. He rubbed his face, counting the days till he’d be shut of the Adeline. She was a beautiful boat – a four-masted barque with more yards of canvas than any ship he’d ever sailed on – but when they reached Havana he’d leave her without even a glance behind him.

It wouldn’t be long now. They were just coming up on the Grand Turks and Caicos. Tonight they would skirt northward, avoiding the islands lest they be taken, their cargo seized, and their selves imprisoned. Tomorrow eve they’d fall off southwesterly past Grand Inagua and on to Baracoa, sidestepping the heavy traffic of the Windward Passage. Two weeks beating north along the shore of Cuba, dispensing of their cargo, and he’d never have to set eye on Bayonne again, unless it were down the gun sights of a man-o’-war.

He had plans to join the blockade fleet after his marriage to Louisa. His familiarity with the secret passages between the islands and the hidden inlets where cargo was unloaded, ought to be worth a promotion to first mate on a British or American privateer in the anti-slave trade campaign. He’d bring Louisa to Dominique or Nassau, and devote his days to chasing down ships like the Adeline.

He just hoped he could avoid prison. And that he wouldn’t be plagued by night terrors.

Three hours later, he clambered out of his narrow berth, and stretched mightily. After seven weeks at sea, there was nothing more inviting than thought of a goodly hour in a rum-hole and a full night in a feather bed, unless it were someone sweet to share them both.

The thumping of feet running past the door of the cabin he shared with the chief mate roused him fully, and he headed to the main deck to see what all the commotion was about. A Naval frigate hailing them? A slave revolt?

He emerged from the below decks to a stiff wind and the shouting of sailors. The

Captain was amidships hurling orders at the crew, pointing at two or three men with each command. It looked as though Gossett's hurricane was blowing up after all.

"Furl the mains and the stays. Hoist the storm sails and haul the fore sail to the starboard and aft to the port. Stow the longboat. Rig the storm lines. Batten down the holds, and check the carriages on all the cannons. Lash oil cloth over them hatches, and nail 'em closed. I don't want no niggers taking advantage of that storm to man a revolt, and if ary a one of 'em drowns, I'll take his price outta your hides."

"But sir!" Hawkins protested. "The negroes! They'll suffocate without fresh air. And if we were to founder, they wouldn't be able to escape. They'd all drown!" Hawkins knew it was a bad idea to contradict the captain, especially in front of his crew, but he simply couldn't keep still. Bayonne whirled on him.

"We ain't gonna founder, you gutless Yank. And if we do, they's insured. We let 'em escape and we can't sell 'em nor collect premiums on 'em. And if they revolt, a sweet little Nancy-boy pansy like yourself won't last a minute. Any more objections, Hawkins? Or would you like to dance at the gratings this morning?"

Hawkins swallowed hard, and shook his head. The threat of a whipping wasn't idle. He knew he was lucky he'd gotten off with a just tongue-lashing, lucky the captain was preoccupied with his orders.

The sailors scattered to their respective tasks, and Hawkins hurried to the poop-deck. Gossett greeted him from the aft rail with a dark grimace.

"I don't like the looks of that there squall," he informed Hawkins.

"Taint natural."

Indeed, Hawkins could hardly argue with his assessment. Dark, roiling thunderheads towered ominously, less than a mile away, directly abaft the ship. Streaks of lightning slashed down at a sea whipped white by a fearsome wind. The rain was so heavy that one could see nothing in the lowering heart of the storm, as though God Almighty had pulled a grey curtain around the dismal tempest, shielding some fearsome evil within.

“A storm like that and all the rest of the sky blue as Nantucket bayberries.” Gossett fingered his medal of St. Elmo, and wouldn’t meet Hawkins’s eye.

Hawkins looked around, startled to find Gossett spoke truly; the menacing thunderheads were indeed the only clouds in a perfect bowl of blue heaven.

“Captain’s mad to think we can outrun her on her own wind. We should be baring the poles and lowering anchor, not setting canvas.”

“Why don’t you so advise him?”

“Hah! And get my back striped? I’d druther take my chances with that tempest than the captain’s temper.”

That was a sentiment Hawkins could fully appreciate.

“Them fishes was fleeing this storm, and the wind fled it too.

Mark my words, tis a curse from Sam Hill himself.”

“Surely the captain intends to keep out of her way,” Hawkins said. “She’s small enough, we can skirt her flanks, and she’ll be past us before we know it.”

Gossett grunted and glared over the railing, fingering his medal.

“Tis an ill that blows no good,” Hawkins offered, bravely attempting a cheerful tone. Gossett’s scowl only deepened.

“Pschf! Don’t be a flibbertigibbet. Nary a droplet of good will come from this here gale.”

As the two men watched, the dark clouds gained upon them and the wind began to moan in the riggings, like a hound on the track of its prey. The slaves who had been so silent and sullen the past week began screaming and wailing and pounding against the walls of the ‘tweendecks.

“Poor souls. I can barely stand their wretched keening.”

“The black man has no soul. Lucky beggars. They’ve naught to fear from Davy Jones.”

The captain mounted the poop deck with a scowl to match Gossett's.

"Soggering sea dogs! Plotting a mutiny are you?"

"No sir! Plotting a course, sir. So as to avoid the storm."

"Bah! We sail full downwind. Running on her gales, we'll reach Baracoa afore the first bell of morning watch."

"But sir," Hawkins started, and then held his tongue. He might have gotten away with contradicting the captain once, but a second infraction was bound to be met with Beelzebub's own wrath. Better to offer up a prayer to St. Peter that the ship held together under the fierce winds and high seas they were sure to encounter.

"Aye, sir."

"Get to work, you lazy, good for nothing fistes. Standing here lollygagging ain't getting us to Baracoa. Get on the decks, where you belong!"

"Aye, sir!"

Hawkins and Gossett scurried down the companionway to the main deck.

"You take the port side and I'll handle the starboard," Gossett shouted, heading forwards.

Hawkins plunged into the fray, giving words of encouragement or rebuke left and right as needed, checking knots and testing tension.

Spindrift sprayed over the gunwales, soaking the men, making the decks slippery. In the bows, a trio of sailors was struggling with the great iron cook pot, which was to be lashed to the bulwarks lest it be washed over and lost at sea. Hawkins squeezed among the men and laid his shoulder against the cold metal.

"Push! Push!" he shouted, shoving with all his might until the pot tipped to its side, spilling forth fifty gallons of mingled rain and sea.

Together they rolled it to the rail, and the sailors bound it fast.

When Hawkins had traversed the length of the ship, he hurried belowdecks to check on the coopers and caulkers who would seal any cracks opened by the strain of the ship pitching and rolling in the heavy surf. He stopped by his cabin to be sure his few belongings were properly stowed, and to steal a glance at the miniature portrait his fiancée had pressed into his hand on his departure from Liverpool, so many months ago. He lifted it briefly to his lips, praying the Adeline would come through this storm safely.

His heart enflamed with tender memories and unspeakable fears, Hawkins returned to the main deck. The wind was now howling, the spray lashing the decks and men. The bow plunged forward, the deck pitching and heaving as following waves plowed into the Adeline's stern. Masts and rigging groaned beneath the savage onslaught, lines snapping, and portions of the spars and other rigging falling to the deck. The captain strode to and fro in the very waist of the ship, shouting orders.

“Chop that great chunk there! Heave it over! Heave! Heave!”

The sailors hurried to toss the pieces into the frothing sea, for the accumulation of weight on any one section of the ship could cause her to capsize.

Hawkins hesitated only a moment. The captain's attention was elsewhere, and the crew's as well. He grabbed a crowbar from the tool stowage, and ran forward, prying up the nails from each hatch he passed. If it was the Adeline's fate to go down this afternoon, at least the slaves would have a chance to swim for their lives. If they survived this accursed storm, there would be hell to pay when the Captain found the hatches loose. Hawkins had no doubt that after his earlier outburst he'd be fingered as the culpable party. With any luck the crew would hold their tongues rather than condemn him to a lashing, or worse keelhauling. If not, well he'd just have to take what was coming to him. He could not stand by and let 500 souls be confined in the hold.

Just as he was returning the crowbar to its locker, Gossett rushed past, headed for the poop deck. Hawkins followed. The helmsmen looked mightily relieved to see them. Gossett surveyed the beleaguered sails, checked the compass, and strode to the aft rail, where he glared at the storm, as though by the sheer power of his gaze he could keep her off their stern. She had drawn much closer, the curtain of rain barely half a mile behind them now.

As they watched, a dark shadow seemed to coalesce amidst the roiling clouds.

“Look!” Hawkins shouted. “A ship! Hard in the teeth of the storm!”

She pulled free from the grey shroud of rain, running high on a seething crest of stygian surf. Her dark hull was scarred, her flanks scored by long gouges, a ragged cavity gaped in her bow. Her sails were shredded, strips of cloth flailing at the masts and arms. Yet, like a wheeling gull, she soared before the black and furious gale.

“Demon ship! God save our souls!”

No sooner had the words left Gossett’s mouth than they were struck by a frightful noise, like the shrieking of a thousand fiends.

Seconds later, the Adeline was hammered by a wind so powerful she almost toppled over onto her side. One of the cannons broke loose from its tether, careened across the deck, and, with a calamitous crash, broke through the far side of the ship, plunging into the boiling sea, dragging with it a screeching seaman whose leg had got caught in the dangling ropes.

The dark ship loomed behind them, advancing with prodigious speed, bearing down upon them like some great, malevolent, vulture, closing in on its prey.

“Bear away starboard! Hard alee!” Gossett shouted to the quaking helmsmen.

The helmsmen spun his wheel, and the Adeline carved through the crashing surf, veering away from her black pursuer.

“Shoals ahead!” came a shout from the foredeck. Gossett and Hawkins raced to the forward rail. The ocean before them was whipped into churning sprays of foam, marking a sunken reef.

“To the windward! To the windward! Hard over!” Gossett yelled “Hard over to port! Give her all you’ve got, Mr. Johansen!”

With a groan that shivered the length of her timbers, the Adeline heeled under the wind, waves crashing over her decks. The end of a spar drug through the surf, and for a long moment, it seemed she would plummet clear over, then, as the wave bottomed out, she pulled free, slicing through the murderous seas.

Hawkins held his breath, listening for the sickening crunch of coral tearing into oak. The soles of his feet seemed to reach down, through the decks, past the hull into the water below, reaching to feel the ocean floor skimming only inches below the keel, but no shudder ripped through the Adeline's timbers, no sudden sundering of wooden beams shook her foundations.

No sooner had they turned away from the deadly shoals, than the black ship was upon them again, surging forward on the larboard, hounding them relentlessly, her bowsprit aimed at the Adeline's fore mast.

Hawkins stared aghast at the fiendish ship.

"What monstrous purpose is this! Does she mean to scuttle us?"

Shall we suffer her to ram us, or give way and founder on the reefs!"

The Adeline yawed wildly as the helmsmen spun the wheel first one way then the other, trying to dodge both the stalking ship and the heaving breakers. The sailors staggered on deck, sliding uncontrollably from rail to rail, clinging madly to whatever handhold they could manage.

A piercing squeal split the air, and a terrific jolt threw them all to the deck. A long and tortured grinding traveled the length of the Adeline, and, with a dreadful convulsion, she came to a halt.

No sooner had she run aground, than the wind died away and the waves stilled. The black ship pulled alongside the Adeline, and a swarthy sailor flew across, swinging upon a loose halyard to land on the poop deck with a sullen thud.

Hawkins's blood chilled at the mere sight of him, for he would have sworn no man had stood upon the decks of that cursed vessel.

No living man could have sailed her. But the figure before him appeared like no ghost Hawkins had ever heard tale of.

He was at least six feet tall and wore nothing but short, loose trousers, a silver scabbard, and a snow-white turban. His build was powerful, and his skin gleamed like oiled ebon. He stood stock still, arms akimbo, bare feet spread wide, his gaze raking across the men on deck, intense and piercing, as though he could see a man's soul through his eyes. With an abrupt flourish of his sword, he

let out a fierce shout.

“Bismillaaaaah!”

A hundred voices answered from the decks of the black ship.

“Wa lillah alhamd!”

From the below decks of the Adeline, came a single, echoing cry, which rose into a riotous clamoring.

“Afuuna! Afuuna! Hahunaa!”

A horde of sailors, each one blacker than the next, swarmed across the divide, some swinging on ropes as had their captain, others leaping through the air. Hawkins had no illusion that they intended a rescue. Pirates, they must be. Barbary, by the look of them, though they were far afield if that were the case.

Captain Bayonne stormed onto the poop deck, his saber brandished in one hand, his pistol in the other.

“What is the meaning of this!” he snarled. “Driving my ship onto the shoals! Boarding without leave! Do you think you can take my ship, or my cargo, without a fight?”

The pirate captain looked him dead in the eye, and then broke into a broad grin.

“No.”

His crew laughed heartily, clearly relishing the prospect of a bloodbath.

“Captain, sir,” Hawkins spoke up. “They outnumber us eight to one. Mayhaps we ought to negotiate.”

“Why, you yellow-bellied, piss-proud, boat-licking bastard. How dare you!” Bayonne turned his blade towards Hawkins, but no sooner had his attention left the pirate captain, than his sword and gun were flying through the air, knocked away by the pirate’s blade. A dozen of his men swarmed over Bayonne. Bayonne fought ferociously, swinging with both fists, kicking at any knee he could reach, screaming for his crew to come to his aid. Gosset and Johansen jumped into the

melee, their swords whistling. Hawkins reached for his cutlass, but the pirate captain's blade was at his throat.

He shook his head slowly, speaking in the broad tones of West Africa.

"I don't think so."

Hawkins hesitated. His captain needed his assistance. He might be able to knock the pirate's blade away. But to what purpose? The pirates would take the Adeline, with or without resistance. What use flinging himself to an inevitable death?

Besides, he thought these swarthy men might treat their African brethren better than their future owners would. That alone, was sufficient reason to yield. He'd rather cede the Adeline and their profits along with her, than consign those poor souls to a lifetime of living hell on some Cuban sugar plantation.

Hawkins tossed his sword to the deck. The pirated captain swooped it up, and joined two of his men who stood at the top of the companionway, blocking access to the poop deck, fighting off any of the Adeline's half-drowned seamen who cared to heed their captain's call. Truth be told, not many dared.

The battle was over in short order. Bayonne, Gossett, Johansen, and Hawkins were lined along the fore rail of the poop deck, hands trussed behind their backs, each guarded by a pair of pirates. Gossett was bleeding heavily from a gash on his upper arm, and Bayonne's face was swollen and bruised almost beyond recognition. Johansen swayed unsteadily, as though at any moment he might fall over.

The pirate captain laughed, a deep, throaty chuckle.

"You cannot vanquish the living martyrs of God. Our flesh does not bruise, and our breath cannot be knocked away. Your sword and bullet may cut through our flesh, but it does not wound, for we have our sustenance in the presence of the Lord!"

Hawkins shivered at his words. Not mere human pirates, then.

Ghost pirates. Pirates risen from the dead. Avenging angel Pirates.

As though he had read his thoughts, the pirate captain turned his eyes upon Hawkins, his gaze like burning ingots.

“We are neither ghost, nor angel. Nor have we risen up from the dead, for the martyrs of God do not pass away like mortal men, but in the moment of departure we are taken up by Him in whose palm lies the very soul of every man. Does not the Holy Book say, Think not that those who are killed along the path of God are dead. Nay! They live!”

He turned to Captain Bayonne, his voice booming across the Adeline so that all men on deck could hear him.

“You stole us from our homes, turned us into chattel. And if we did not serve your ends, you sought to kill us. You cast us into the briny deep when we were ill. You threw us into the seas when we protested the treatment we received at your hands. No mercy did you show us, dumping us overboard like so much refuse into the waves when we weakened from lack of food and air. One hundred and thirty three men on one ship alone! But God does not suffer His bondsmen to be discarded. God has His Purpose, and to His Ends shall all things bend.”

Hawkins swallowed hard. Slave pirates, then. Ghosts or demons, undead or brought back to life, he could not say. But slaves nonetheless. Slaves who, consigned to an untimely burial at sea, had not sunk to the brackish bottoms, but had somehow, by some miracle, been remitted unto this uncanny ship. Slaves who now sought out the very captains and crews who had treated them so callously so they might wreak their vengeance upon them. No, so they might wreak God’s vengeance upon them!

The slave crew was pushing past Hawkins, hurrying down onto the deck, rounding up the remaining crew, ripping the battens away from the hatches. The slaves below poured forth like a mass of ants fleeing a drowned nest. They clapped and laughed, and threw their arms around the neck of their saviors. One slapped the overseer hard in the face, but most were too eager gulping in breaths of fresh air to take revenge.

It was, Hawkins thought, a sort of rescue after all.

The slave sailors gathered the Adeline’s crew on the poop deck, forcing them to remove their clothes, leaving them as naked as they had left their African captives, shackling their legs and arms and necks with the iron their cargo had

lately been wearing. Hawkins kept his eyes averted from his compatriots for they made a sickly, unnatural sight, arms and faces burnished with sun, legs and stomachs pale as dead fish, their manhoods dangling like so many pink sausages, except for one sailor's, which, despite the utter lack of plausible provocation, stood at attention, a netherly mockery of a seaman's salute.

More unearthly sailors poured across a gangplank from the black ship, carrying barrels of water, sacks of bread, and baskets of fresh fruits. The Africans surged forward, desperate for food and drink.

One by one, the Adeline's crew was marched across the plank and onto the deck of their nemesis.

As Hawkins passed by, the slave captain leaned close. "Where you are going, you will wish you had died here with my sword in your gut."

Hawkins had no doubt that the captain spoke truly.

A trickle of sweat slid down his temple, and he felt as though his breath was congealed within his chest. He looked around frantically, trying to find a means to escape.

"Move!" one of the sailors shouted, shoving him forward toward the dark ship.

With his feet in chains, his stride restricted to half its normal length, Hawkins stumbled as he stepped down off the gangplank, lurching to the deck, scraping a shoulder and both knees.

"On your feet!" a burly sailor commanded.

Before Hawkins could comply, a stinging lash sliced across his back, searing a fiery welt into his flesh. He jerked, gritting his teeth against the pain, but did not cry out.

His tormentor leered at him.

"You are brave today, boy, but will you be tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that? Every day, I will find an excuse to scourge you."

Hawkins struggled to his feet, fraught with the knowledge that some day he

would surely crack. He would scream and writhe under the whip, until at last he broke down entirely, like the slaves that lay in their places within the hold, motionless, beyond the ability to stir, beyond the desire to stay alive.

The Adeline's crew huddled miserably on the dark ship's deck.

The condition of the vessel was no better on close inspection than they had seemed from afar. The beams of her deck were soft and spongy, rotting away, and Hawkins feared that any moment any one of them might plunge clear through to the holds below. Half her halyards were missing, and one spar hung askance on its mast. It was a wonder the ship remained afloat, how it could possibly travel was an utter mystery.

Once again the captain's voice sounded close in Hawkins ear.

"She needs no canvas, no soaring masts, nor solid timbers, for she sails on God's own breath."

Hawkins jumped, and turned to face the captain, who stood before the ragged band, his eyes gleaming with triumph.

"Welcome to Al-Jaza'!"

"Where are you taking us?" Captain Bayonne growled.

"Where you took us. To the slave market. In Irem, the city of the Jinn. To serve them as our brothers served you."

"Jinn!"

"One hears they are harsher masters even than the white devil."

"There is no such thing as Jinn!"

The slave captain threw back his head, laughing.

"Tell that to those who dwell in Irem when their flails are tearing into your disobedient back. Abubakar! Take them below."

The sailor that had lashed Hawkins stepped forward, snapping his whip in the

air.

“Move, you whey-bellied maggots!”

The Adeline’s crew shuffled forward, and down the gangway to the lower decks. The Al-Jaza’ had been outfitted like any slaver, with ‘tweendecks which doubled the storage capacity. Packed into these dim, suffocating holds were several hundred white men, naked and chained together, hand to hand, foot to foot. As had the slaves on the Adeline, their pale, gaunt bodies lay in a dank mire of their own blood and urine, feces and vomit. The stench was as horrid, and Hawkins felt near to fainting to think that he should soon be shackled in that fetid hold. The prisoners cast despairing, haunted eyes upon the Adeline’s crew, eyes that gazed from wasted faces, eyes that held forth no glimmer of hope.

“Don’t worry,” Abubakar said. “We ahnt so cruel, nor so kind, as you were. We don’t dump our sick overboard. Everyone here goes to Irem.”

The mockery in his voice convinced Hawkins that murder would have been kindness indeed, compared to the fate that awaited them.

And yet how could they complain, for it was no different than the fate to which they had so willingly consigned their own living cargo.

“Keep going!” Abubakar snapped his whip again. “To the galley.”

For a panicked moment, Hawkins thought they were to be killed and eaten, fed to the Africans they had so lately starved, but the two men in the galley wielded no knives.

The first was short, and built as stoutly as Abubakar. The second was tall, and thin. He wore a long robe of the purest, white cotton, and a matching turban. In one hand he carried a string of tiny, wooden beads, which he fingered rhythmically, lisping unintelligible words to himself. Hawkins presumed he was a holy man of sorts.

As they entered, he looked upon them, his gaze poignant and sympathetic, almost mournful. His companion’s look held no such compassion.

“You first,” Abubakar said, pointing to the captain.

Bayonne mustered what a dignity a naked, fettered man can, and stepped forward.

The priest raised his hand level with Bayonne's forehead.

"Yudkhilu man yasha'a fi rahmatihi. Wal thalimeen – a'adda la hum athabun aleem," he chanted. He let his gaze bore into Bayonne's eyes, then inclined his head almost imperceptibly as though acquiescing to some invisible master. He raised his eyes once again, and, in sepulchral tones, droned, "He admits to his Mercy whom He will. But the evil-doers – for them has He prepared a grievous castigation."

Abubakar yanked the captain toward the stove, and Hawkins saw with horror, that in the coals lay irons like those used to brand a bullock.

"Surely you don't intend to brand us like beasts!" Bayonne protested.

"Ahnt nothing that ahnt been done afore," Abubakar answered him, turning his forearm upwards, revealing a welted scar in the shape of a W.

"William Woollery. He would have been my owner if they hadn't fed me to the sea."

The shorter sailor pulled a fiery iron from embers, and Abubakar grabbed Bayonne's arm. The smell of burning flesh filled the galley.

Bayonne cried out, one long, tortured howl of agony. Two livid, interwoven diamonds blazed on his skin. Abubakar nodded approvingly.

"Double diamonds . In Kumasi, in the kinte, they stand for justice... and for slavery. In the holy language, the 'adileen are those who are just...and the Adeline was a slaving ship. And now you belong to the Al-Jaza' – the Recompense. How fitting."

The captain was dazed, his eyes unfocused, his mind oblivious to the man's words.

"Come on! Buck up, man! In a week, you'll be boasting to the other captains. Nary a one has a brand to rival the Adeline's."

“Captains?” Bayonne asked, staring at Abubakar without comprehension.

“So many ships we chased. So many we stove in – the San Jan, the Henrietta Marie, the Adelaide, and the Mary. The Phoenix, the Dove, and the Fox. The Christopher, the Abercrombie. The Esperanza, the Trouvadore, the Creole, the Lyra. Dozens and dozens of ships we have sunk. Thousands of slaves freed. And each ship’s crew, we gave their own brand. None is the equal of yours.”

The captain’s eyes glazed, and he shook his head.

“I don’t understand.”

“Bah! Enough! We haven’t got all day! You next!” Abubakar hauled the overseer before the holy man. Again the incantations.

Again the somber assent.

“No! No! Not me! Take another!” the overseer shrieked, thrashing about in frenzy of desperation, struggling to break Abubakar’s grasp. The man’s fingers gripped like the coils of a python. Again the sizzling of live meat, and the horrid smell. The overseer screeched and fell senseless to the floor. Hawkins felt he might collapse himself, from the mere anticipation of the tribulation that lay before him.

One by one, the sailors were hauled forward. One by one, their flesh hissed and charred, their screams buffeted Hawkins’s ears. The number remaining dwindled steadily, and with each of his compatriots subjected to the crimson iron, the pit of Hawkins’s dread yawned deeper and deeper. His heart was palpitating, racing near unto bursting. His stomach churned, and his knees threatened to give way.

His chest felt crushed. He could not get enough air to breathe.

“Oh God in Heaven!” he prayed silently, though he was not accustomed to reverence. “Deliver me from this appalling fate! If ever I have done but an ounce of good, if even the smallest of my deeds has been pleasing to Thee, then avert from the hide of this, the most abased of Your creation, the hideous torture that lays in wait for him.

Forgive his sins, though he has been long astray, cleanse his heart, renew his soul, and ever will I walk in the ways of righteousness, ever will I follow in the

paths of Your Bidding, ever will I toil as Your humblest of servants.”

A sharp tug on his arm, and Hawkins found himself face to face with the holy man. He chanted the foreign words, peering deep into Hawkins’s eyes. A flicker of brow, and he held his hand up.

“Not this one,” he said.

“What!” Abubakar exclaimed.

The holy man’s eyes blazed with sudden zeal, and his voice rang forth like the sounding of Gabriel’s bugle.

“This one is a traitor!”

The words echoed in sudden silence, and were it not for Abubakar’s firm hold upon his arm, Hawkins would have fallen to the floor in sheer terror.

“Aye!” The priest’s voice had sunk to a whisper. “A traitor to his captain, and his kind!”

Hawkins swooned, sure that he was breathing his last breaths, that any moment, he would be summarily executed in some barbarous manner. Abubakar pulled him sharply upright, making him face the priest.

The holy man towered over him, his eyes raised to heaven, his hands lifted as though offering a burnt sacrifice.

“This very day, this man did defy his captain, chancing a dance with the nine-tailed cat, so our sisters might not die smothering in an airless hold. This very day, this man did disobey his captain, loosing the brads prisoning our brothers, so a foundering ship might not drag them to the icy depths. This very day, this man did mutiny his captain, counseling surrender and refusing to fight, so our daughters and sons might not be condemned to a life of brutal servitude. His captain does not deserve such a man, nor does he deserve his captain’s fate!”

Abubakar glared at Hawkins for a long moment.

“Is this true?” he demanded, shaking Hawkins violently by the shoulder. Hawkins nodded feebly, for indeed he could not deny the charges.

“Free him!” The holy man bellowed, his voice a triumphant roar.

Abubakar bowed his head in deference.

“As the faqir has spoken, so it shall be.”

“Yudkhilu man yasha’a fi rahmatihi.” The holy man chanted softly. “Surely He admits to His Mercy whom He will.”

Hawkins’s mind reeled in confusion as the priest unchained his wrists and ankles. Surely they didn’t intend to let him go!

“Don’t move an inch,” Abubakar told the rest of the Adeline’s crew, steering Hawkins toward the door. “Or it will go worse with you when I return.”

His partner by the stove flourished his ruddy iron at the cowering remnants of the crew. “Don’t worry. They ahn’t a-goin’ nowheres.”

Abubakar sent Hawkins across the gangplank as naked as he had arrived. The wind was gusting again, grim and surly and cold, raising gooseflesh on his flanks, yowling across the ocean’s surface, whipping her into jagged whitecaps and flying foam. Dark clouds skulked in the south and the east. The sails, what was left of them, flapped wildly in the gale, and the two ships were tossed hither and fro by the savage waves like the twin hulls of a ruined Coromandel catamaran.

But no one seemed to be concerned about the rising seas or the lowering skies. The former slaves had taken over the poop deck, upending empty ale kegs for instruments. Adorned in the clothing of their prior captives, men, women, and children were celebrating their freedom on all sides, singing and dancing in time to the feral beat of the makeshift drums. The rhythm, the flailing of the arms and the stamping of their feet, grew ever more frenzied, as though trying to outpace the wind. Or, Hawkins thought, as though trying to goad her on to greater ferocity.

In the very prow of the ship, drenched with sea spray, the captain stood, arms and eyes raised to heaven, chanting over the howling of the wind. In rows behind him, members of the slave crew sat with a few dozen of the freed slaves, their palms facing skyward in shallow echoes of the captain’s outstretched arms, their voices calling out rhythmic punctuation to his recitation.

“Allahul Ahad! Anzalna alaina asifa”

“Ameen!”

“Allahur Rahman! Anzalna alaina asifa!”

“Ameen!”

“Allahud Dharr! Anzalna alaina asifa!”

“Ameen!”

With each cry of Ameen, the holy man’s hands jabbed skyward, insistently imploring. Hawkins could not say for sure whether their mounting voices were in response to the rising swells and the ever more furious howling of wind, or if the wind and waves redoubled their violence in response to their cries.

A turbaned and trousered sailor grabbed Hawkins by the shoulder and pushed him toward the companionway.

“Go down,” he ordered Hawkins. “This is no place for the likes of you.”

“What are they doing? The Adeline can’t weather another storm!”

“And she cahn’t sail into port with a great gash running from lip to heel, with all but one of her crew missing. When she runs aground in the squall, no one will wonder at her wound, nor that all the crew are gone missing. Hahn’t yer heard of the Esperanza and the Trouvadore – how their cargo went free, and their crews went to jail, when they foundered on the Caicos?”

He gave Hawkins another shove.

“Now go. Go below.”

Hawkins did as he was told without further protest. If the Al-Jaza’ could sail with rotting timbers, and shreds for sails, then who was to say the Adeline couldn’t make land with the chasm that must surely run the length of her hull.

The door to his cabin hung ajar. His berth had been stripped, his drawers emptied. Louisa’s portrait lay face down on the floor alongside his journal, two

quill pens with broken spines, and his grandfather's watch, the glass face of which had been cracked. He lit the stub of candle in the wall sconce, and sat on his bunk, head buried in his hands, picturing the humiliation of striding into Grand Turk, naked as the day he was born, penniless, a woman's portrait and a broken pocket watch his only possessions. How, he wondered, was he to procure clothing, food, a room at a local inn, or work even, with no a soul to vouch for him and no letter of reference?

A thin cough interrupted his reveries. He raised his head to see a small boy holding forth a neatly folded stack of clothes. Trousers, and a shirt! Never had clothing seemed so dear.

"Thank you! Thank you!" he cried, hugging the boy tightly to him, and kissing him on the top of his head.

By the time he had pulled on the clothes, the boy was gone, and Hawkins had vowed he would serve in the Blockade Fleet that hunted down illegal slavers like the Adeline, though he would just as soon never set foot on the deck of a ship ever again.

The Adeline swayed and rolled as she cut through the heavy swell. Hawkins paced the length of his berth, reeling from side to side with the pitching of the ship, fretting, worried that when the Adeline breached he would be drowned in his cabin. Perhaps the negroes did not intend to free him after all.

At last, to distract his mind, he retrieved his bottle of ink from beneath the bunk, threw himself into his chair, set pen to page, and began to write down the events of the past day, lest they grow hazy in his memory. Perhaps he could sell his story to a gentleman's magazine as a fiction in the fashion of Irving or Poe. He could certainly use the money. It was one thing to be single and broke. It was quite another to return empty handed to one's fiancé.

A soft rapping came at the cabin door.

"Come in," Hawkins called, and the slave captain entered. He leaned forward, placed his hands on the desk, and peered into Hawkins's face.

"It seems you are the only remaining agent of the Adeline."

Hawkins nodded, wondering just how he was to explain that fact to island

authorities when they ran aground. Not to mention the ship's owners in Liverpool, who, he suspected, would be more distraught about the disappearance of their cargo than the loss of their crew.

The captain made a low whistling noise. Two of his sailors carried a large sea chest into the cabin.

"Then this belongs to you."

Hawkins stood and opened the chest. It was full of gold coins.

"I don't understand."

"The price of your trade goods."

"But the slaves are already free."

"Yes, but without papers. The ship still lives. The owners still live. You still live. I will purchase your cargo, and then free them formally, legally, irrefutably, when we reach Caicos."

Hawkins stared at the mound of gold. Judging from the size of the chest, he could pay the owners, and still have half a fortune.

Enough to purchase a small estate, a title even. The prospects of domesticated bliss with Louisa had suddenly improved beyond reckoning.

But the slaves were not his to sell. Not any more. And if gave the money to the owners, they'd just invest in another ship, another load of human freight. He couldn't bear the thought of those ruined lives on his conscience.

He shook his head. "The authorities in the Caicos will free them formally. Slavery is illegal there. The owners will have no recourse against me."

The captain picked up a coin and languidly fingered it.

"It is not as though we want for gold, with all the ships we have taken. And what need have we of gold, we who are nourished in the embrace of the Merciful One's bounties? Take the money."

Hawkins frowned, and shook his head again.

“No. I don’t want your blood money. I’ve washed my hands of this business, and I won’t truck with it anymore. I won’t take the price of slaves, and I won’t give it to others who’ll just use it to buy more.”

“You are sure? You could have a life of ease. The full ship’s share is yours.”

“Even so. I don’t want it.”

The captain laughed broadly, and slapped his thigh.

“Hah! You have succored yourself indeed! Abubakar was sure you would fail the final test, but the faqir was right. You are a decent man. The jinn will have to make do with one less soul.”

The two sailors slammed the lid of the chest, and carried it out of Hawkins’s cabin. Hawkins’s eyes widened. He had never imagined the danger he was in.

The captain stood, and dropped a plump red velvet bag on the desk.

“A wedding present, for an honorable friend.”

Hawkins started, fingering Louisa’s portrait in his pocket. How could the captain know about Louisa? Then again, how could the captain do anything? With God’s help, he would say, all things are possible.

The captain took the pen, carefully tore a sheet from Hawkins’s journal, and began writing in a bold hand.

To my dear comrade and compatriot, Jeremy Hawkins, on the occasion of his marriage to Louisa Sutherford, this, the 21st day of August, 1858, a present of 1000 gold doubloons. May the Ever-Merciful Lord in Heaven smile on your fortunes.

May He bless you with righteous offspring, unrestrained income, and everlasting felicity.

Ever your friend,

In times of plenty or times of need,

Mohammad Aezzuiddin Al-Ouakari

Prince of the Malinké

He signed his name with a flourish and blew on the paper to dry the ink. Then he folded it carefully and dripped a bit of wax from the candle to seal the seam, pressing it with the silver ring he wore on his right hand.

Hawkins took the letter, flabbergasted.

“Prince?” he asked.

“Yes. Before the white man stole me away and threw me away like so much filthy refuse when his abuse made me ill.”

Hawkins shook his head. A thousand doubloons were enough to purchase and outfit a modest ship of his own. With hard work, and careful investment, he could propel his family to a life of comfort.

“I-I don’t know how to thank you,” he said.

“Don’t bother,” the captain replied. “I am Amir of the Al-Jaza’.

Recompense is my duty.”

He clapped Hawkins on the shoulder.

“Come. It is time for you to leave us.”

For a moment, Hawkins thought it had been a treachery after all.

But the captain’s smile reassured him that all was well.

The Adeline’s decks were deserted. The negroes had taken shelter below. The gale whistled wrathfully through the rigging, driving torrents of rain nearly horizontally across the deck, the masts and spars groaning piteously beneath the vicious assault. The waves crashed over the gunwales, until it seemed the Adeline sailed not upon the sea, but beneath her, within her. No hand at her helm, she lurched, and rolled, and beat about from crest to trough like a kit set

upon by a rabid hound.

For the second time that day, Hawkins heard the grisly screeching of coral biting into wood, and with a tremendous wrench the *Adeline* jarred to a halt. A deafening crack came from the bow, and the foremast sheered clean off, tumbling to the deck with a fearful crash.

A knot of sailors emerged from below, carrying Hawkins's rucksack and an oilcloth bag of provisions. They hurried him to the longboat, and he climbed in, stowing his meager belongings in the locker and lashing it closed. The pirate captain leaned forward to clasp his hand.

"Best of luck, my friend. Ma salama!"

"Farewell!" Hawkins cried as they lowered him down into the seething waves. He watched their figures recede into the grey mist until he could no longer make them out. The longboat bucked mightily in the surging chop, and it was all he could do to keep from being thrown into the sea, but already the wind was letting up, the rain slackening.

Somehow, he knew, he would be picked up leagues away, safe and sound, having miraculously weathered one of the worst storms in the history of the Caribbean in an open dory. Words formed in his mind, and he saw himself telling a circle of American midshipmen how the *Adeline* had thrown herself upon the rocky reefs as though determined to drown them all. Telling them how the first longboat had been swamped and sunk, sending the captain and nine sailors to a watery grave. Telling how a gargantuan wave had swept the first mate and eight other sailors from his own longboat, himself the only one spared, by the grace of God.

More Irving style than Poe, he thought, for at least there was one survivor.

A Straight Path Through the Stars

Kevin James Miller

More than 70 stories and poems of Mr. Miller in the horror, SF, fantasy and crime genre have been published. Cemetery Dance said his short story “Rain on a Stranger’s Eyes” was “hard-hitting” and “a solid noir masterpiece with chilling irony.” Publisher’s Weekly wrote that “Stealing Klatzman’s Diary” was a “morbidly amusing caper with a Shakespearean body count.” The following story is also worthy of garnering quite a few oohs and ahs from reviewers.

“This war with the secularists has gone on past the moment of value. We concede no point in this ceasefire with the so-called ‘United States of America’ and retreat to the lands of the west and the south. We pray that one day, from the east coast to the west coast, from the Canadian border to the Mexican border, there will once again be one nation, truly under the Lord.” — Statement from the Republic of God, Governing Council, by Darren Connor, Supreme Executive. Excerpt from The Second American Civil War, by Kathleen Rellim.

Kifi Maqsood, a young man with brown eyes and neatly trimmed black beard, knelt on the floor and bowed. He wore a white flight suit. Oblivious to the quiet hum of his ship’s warp engines he said, “Ashahadu an la ilaha ill Allah wa ashahadu annu Muhammadar Rasulullah.” Sam, the ship’s computer, maintained a respectful silence.

When Maqsood was done, Sam said, through the cabin’s floor and cabin speakers, “Our hourly scan has something else to record instead of ‘no notable phenomenon.’”

Maqsood stood. “More debris from pre-First Contact explorers, huh? Well, we’ll bringing back to Corps Central plenty to keep the historians happy.”

“No,” said Sam. “More like evidence of Second Contact, Kifi.”

Maqsood sat down at the control panel so quickly he almost knocked the photo of some of his aunts, uncles and cousins onto the floor.

“Sam, do you mean we’ve actually encountered evidence of ...”

Maqsood couldn’t finish. The idea of it was so overwhelming.

“It is literally the whole point of the Corps, Kifi. As a first step for Second Contact.”

“I know, Sam, but ... Well, there’s often a big step between what’s planned and what happens.”

“Oh, I can show you the statistics on that. Can I take you to the object the question?”

“Sure.”

The hum of the warp engines quieted down to nothing.

Maqsood punched up an on-screen display. Floating in front of Maqsood’s ship was a gray cube the size of a small house.

“I’m picking up old traces of power consumption and output,”

Sam said. “So it’s technological.”

“And it’s definitely not Uarthallegor,” Maqsood said. “They’ve got nothing that looks like this. You remember Corps pilot Daniel Bartel found a Uarthallegor ‘nursery ship’ in this sector last month.”

“And it’s not any of the 11132-B ships with Uarthallegor and human co-pilots. Further scans indicate this has been abandoned five, maybe ten years,” Sam said. “I recommend that the next course of action be — ”

Every bell, buzz, hum went off in the control cabin, and every monitor flashed. Masqood backed away from the control panel.

“Sam...?”

“I have no idea what this is,” the computer said. “Just give me a — Oh. Oh dear.”

“What?”

“Kifi, that gray cube is aggressively scanning our literature, cinema and communication log data banks. And that would make my assessment of ‘abandoned’ wrong.”

“Put weapon systems on line.”

“There’s no reason to assume — ”

“Sam!”

“The war has been over twenty years. You can’t let a childhood tragedy — ”

“I just gave you a direct order!”

“Weapon systems on line.”

This appeared on the main screen:

PLSE WAIT

LAN SCAAAN WILL WILL WILL

AILOW EASISR COMMUNICATION.

“Kifi, we’re getting radio communications from the gray cube. In English.”

“Let me hear it.”

A new voice came over the control cabin speaker. It was clearly, like Sam’s voice, a creation of technology, but the rhythms, timing 181

and whole texture bore the sonic marks of somebody entirely unfamiliar with all forms of human speech.

“Greetings, fellow sibling of the Unique. I am Tep-ibo of the Artoogaa. We have no records of any craft like this on Artoogaa. How glorious to witness further evidence of the Unique’s power and majesty.”

“I am Kifi Maqsood, of the species human, from the planet Earth, the United

States of America, Flint, Michigan.”

“My scan of your data banks tells me about the Uarthallegor.

First contact was with ... Stelios Touchtidis. Is my translation device pronouncing the name correctly?”

“Yes. Stelios Touchtidis, ‘the Mayor of the Moon.’”

“My scans of your data banks are picking up tremendous amount of information. It will take me a while to learn it all.”

Words streamed across Maqsood’s main screen: KIFI, THIS IS SAM. MAYBE THIS GUY IS DOING A GREAT JOB OF HIDING THEM, BUT ALL MY SCANS SAY

THIS ALIEN HAS NO WEAPON SYSTEMS ON BOARD.

And I’m still on line to blast this guy, Maqsood thought.

“It appears that your weapon systems are powered, Kifi Maqsood of the Earth. Is there any danger that I should be concerned with?”

“No.” Maqsood turned off the weapon systems manually.

“There’s nothing.”

“Ah, good,” Tep-ibo of the Artoogaa said. “Now, with your permission, if I could establish a visual link between us?”

“Yes,” Maqsood said. He sat in front of his control panel. “You have my permission.”

Tep-ibo of the Artoogaa appeared on Maqsood’s main screen.

Maqsood’s first impression of the alien was that of a large, blue eye, completely encircled by vaguely human arms, at least thirty or fifty of them. But the hands and arms moved so fast he dismissed the idea of getting an accurate visual idea of the alien for the immediate future.

The Uarthallegor were a gas-based life form with telepathic and telekinetic

abilities. And now the Artoogaa ... Maybe humanity would never encounter biped extraterrestrials, so popular in twentieth and twenty-first century television and cinema.

Tep-ibo said, "My screen shows me two limbs. How many together are there for...?"

"Four," Maqsood said. "There are four."

"The strength of them must be tremendous, to compensate for such a small number. Now, Maqsood of the Earth — I have standing orders for a ceremony Artoogaa must perform if encountering any off-world intelligence. It's mostly something I must recite. If I may?"

Good, Maqsood thought. At least one of us knows what to do.

"Please."

"Greetings, new friend. We are the Artoogaa. It is our duty and privilege to worship the Unique, who is attended by the Keg-othoae, guardians and watchers over Artoogaa with a special destiny. The Unique, in its wisdom and power, passes down its laws in the ten thousand verses of the Dh'mmei. It is the special destiny of some Artoogaa to be speakers of the Unique and its ten thousand verses of the Dh'mmei. It is the duty of every Artoogaa to once during our lives make the voyage to the holy city of Chiabhac, to express further reverence and love for the Unique. In the fullness of the all the days, there will eventually come the Closing of all Things, as willed by the Unique. Before then, the Unique measures the deeds and thoughts of all blessed with thought and will. In the natural termination of our biology, each Artoogaa's scuffin will go to dwell with the Unique."

There followed what Maqsood could only think of as an awkward silence.

"Well," Tep-ibo finally said. "If the customs of Earth require nothing special on such an occasion..."

"What? No, actually, we, um..."

"My scans show I can dock with you, Kifi of the Earth. Would you like to meet face to face?"

“Of course.” It would be rude to say otherwise, thought Maqsood.

“My scans show the atmosphere we breathe is toxic to humans.

Do you have the technology to—?”

“Bring my own air? Sure.”

The screen went blank.

“Kifi,” Sam said. “I just have to show you this.”

The screen cut once again to an image of the large gray cube. It appeared to be going partly liquid and beginning to form one end of itself around one end of Maqsood’s ship.

He stood. “Sam, run a safety check on the pressure suit hung up near the air lock.

“Immediately...Okay. It’s fine.”

Maqood started to leave the control cabin.

But he stopped, and stood in the doorway.

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong,” Sam finally said. “Is there?”

Maqood turned around. “Sam, I just realized. We can’t let anyone on Earth know about the Artoogaa.”

“What? Why?”

“Sam, run a comparison check between what Tep-ibo said and the principles of Islam.”

“Just a second...Okay, done,” Sam said. “So I see some similarities.”

“‘Some’? There are a ton!”

“That shouldn’t make a difference, Kifi.”

“U.S. Civil War II ended with a ceasefire, not the defeat of the R.O.G. A ceasefire. The R.O.G. is a sleeping beast. They barely accepted First Contact with the Uarthallegor.”

“Kifi, I don’t see how the R.O.G. had any choice but to accept the Uarthallegor.”

Maqsood picked up from in front of the control panel a photo of a dozen of his relatives. He looked at it. Akil, Bahir, Dawud, Eisa, Fadil, Gadi, Abia, Baraka, Cantara, Fadilah, Hasna, Iamar, Jamilah, Kalila, Lalia ... All so young, and all dead long before their proper time. Dead, so long ago. “You’re a computer, Sam. Not a human being. Humans have a talent for ignoring all kinds of things. Even the facts.” He sat. “In your data banks, you’ll have something about the Uarthallegor ambassador to the UN. It was in Time, a quote from Darren Connor.”

“I have eighty-thousand such articles recorded in my — ”

“The one written by Kenneth Rapp.”

“Just a sec ... Oh. Oh boy. ‘We, the only righteous nation in this hemisphere, are glad that this emissary of these things from the sky expresses no opinion on the subject of religious faith. If we heard of such things, via their witchcraft-mind-speech, talk of some fake religion from ‘Planet X,’ or worse what passed as adherence to such bastard faiths as Hinduism, Buddhism, Bahaism, and so on, we would be forced to take active, vigorous steps.’”

“Well?”

“Kifi, you’re letting the fact that you had family murdered by Christians tempt you into a foolish decision.”

Maqsood shook his head and lay the photo down. “Not Christians. Christianists.”

“You’re just using a term, ‘Christianists,’ from the twentieth, twentieth-first century conservative/Catholic Andrew Sullivan to split hairs,” Sam said.

“I’m using that term because I don’t want to make the same mistakes made by the same people who drowned a dozen members of my family.” Maqsood realized he was crying. He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hands. “The R.O.G. running the camps kept waiting for one of us to see Jesus as ‘the Savior.’

And the pits of the dead piled up.” Maqsood wished Sam had a face, so he could look right into it. “Earth, counting the R.O.G., meeting Muslims from outer space?”

“Calling the Artoogaa ‘Muslims from outer space’ is an absurd, illogical rhetorical tactic if we’re going to sensibly discuss this.”

“Damn it, Sam! You aren’t listening to me! Of course I’m not literally saying that the Artoogaa are ‘Muslims from outer space’!

I’m saying that the fanatics of the R.O.G. will think exactly that, if word gets back about Second Contact! That’s the world’s biggest fist punching in the world’s biggest hornets’ nest.”

“Humanity dealt with that hornets’ nest before, Kifi,” Sam said.

“They can do it again, and survive again.”

“No, Sam. No. No.”

Man and machine were silent for a moment.

Then Sam said, “Kifi. I want you to hear something: ‘Gain knowledge. It’s in its master’s power to tell good from evil. It, knowledge, shows the path to Paradise. It’s our companion in the wasteland, and shield against enemies.’” Sam paused. “I assume ‘Seal of the Prophets’ isn’t just a name.”

On one of the smaller screen appeared these words: “DOCKING WITH ALIEN SHIP COMPLETED IN TWO

MINUTES.”

Sam said, “Well?”

Kifi Masqood saw himself not at as adult male, but childish and small and fragile, the thinnest and driest branch on a very old tree in a very dark place. His childhood was stuffed with memories of grown-up voices and faces, saying how important it was that the United States defeat the R.O.G., beat it clearly and plainly. Otherwise what did Lincoln and the armies under his command fight and for, and what FDR, and Truman. But no matter how many casualties there were,

there was no slowing down the R.O.G., no faint, early echoes of defeat as the war went on and on. Eventual reports of R.O.G.

prisoners of war as young as twelve still conversations in every American town and city.

The U.S. President started to press for a ceasefire, not an unconditional surrender when the other side started to use what their propaganda broadcasts called “glory sacrifice attacks.” And, weirdly, every American citizen called them as well, although earlier eras had names like “suicide bombers.”

His thoughts floating in foul, lifeless river, finally Masqood remembered the face and voice of his maternal grandfather, and these words:

“The bad men of this world can only kill you once. But they can make you afraid forever ... if you’re inclined to help them.”

Masqood stood. “Excuse me, Sam. But I need to go meet the future. Write a first draft of a message about Second Contact, to be delivered via hyperspace to Earth Central, Corps HQ.”

In the corridor between spaceships beings faced each other.

“Hello,” Tep-ibo said after a moment.

Masqood almost said the same thing in return.

But his culture, his faith, his tradition provided a better choice.

“Peace be unto you.”

“What is the greatest virtue among the beings of Earth?”

“Tolerance.”

“And the greatest fault?”

“Tolerance.”

“Kifi of the Earth, that makes no sense. The Unique would not allow such disorder.”

“Tolerance of things that should be tolerated, and tolerating things that shouldn’t.
In your scans of my ship, have you seen the name ‘Allah’?”

“One of your names for the Unique.”

“What creates us, sustains us is Allah. But our supreme crime reduce our or
others’ humanity in His name”

EMISSARY

G. W. Thomas

What is an anthology without a little humour? And who better to contribute that much required ingredient than a writer known mostly for horror tales? G.W. Thomas wears many hats – writer, editor, cartoonist, to name a few. The humor in this story is not the laugh-out-loud type but the type that is sure to bring out a smile on the face of any lover of SF.

“Colonel Golmohammadi, do we shoot or not?” There was only ten minutes left on the counter.

“General, I don’t know.” Arash Golmohammadi ran his hands over his short black hair. His brain hurt.

The general was a short woman of sixty. When she frowned she reminded Golmohammadi of his Jaddah Dorri. You never wanted Jaddah Dorri to frown at you. General Ballista wasn’t much fun either.

“Colonel, your team has been working on this all day. We haven’t much time left. In nine minutes I’ll blow that ship out of space and to hell with the consequences.”

“We still have nine minutes, Mam. Give us those nine minutes,”

Golmohammadi begged.

The general turned away, dismissing the handsome young colonel.

Arash Golmohammadi headed for the bullpen. In the room was his staff of three: Trevor Han, a computer expert borrowed from Central Command; Tamara Scott-Wayans, more PhDs than Einstein; and Golmohammadi’s kid brother, Sadegh. Each was a lieutenant and under Golmohammadi’s command for ten more

minutes. In nine minutes the alien ship would reach Earth's outer atmosphere and General Ballista would fire her missiles. The end-result of that action was not as predictable.

The aliens would either be destroyed and Earth would lose a great opportunity or start an intergalactic war. Or the aliens' defenses were such that the missiles would be neutralized, angering a technologically superior species. Any of the following could spell disaster for the entire planet.

"C'mon, people," Golmohammadi sighed. "We have just over eight minutes to convince the General not to push that button."

"It's not fair. Only sixteen hours to solve this. We had so little information, Colonel," whined Han.

"Stow it, Lieutenant. There's no second place today. We can complain after we've all been vaporized. Now think!"

"Let's go over it again," suggested Tamara, tapping a pencil against her beautiful purple lips.

The two men groaned.

Golmohammadi agreed. "Yes, we've missed something. Tell us again, Tam. What did the that message say this morning?"

"It's short. 'Coming to Earth. Intentions peaceful. Emissary has lead the way. As via Mosaic.'"

"That damned Emissary. That's where we lost all our time. Who is the Emissary?" Han slapped his head in frustration.

"Yes, but it's the key too," insisted the Colonel. "Who is it?"

"I've checked all the major religions, and even some of the fringy ones," Tamara pointed out. "No prophet of Christ, Judah, Buddha, Sufism, Islam, Shintoism, Zoroastrianism or even the Disney-ites claims to know of any immediate live visitation."

"The Second Coming of Christ—"

“We ruled that out. These aliens aren’t returning as far as we can see. Besides, what message would Christ hold for aliens?”

“Maybe we’ve been looking in the wrong place,” offered Sadeqh for the first time. “Their Emissary might not be religious at all.”

“But what Emissary would aliens have?” countered Han.

“Their technology would seem like magic.”

“That’s only if the Emissary came a thousand years ago,” Tamara said. “What if he or she came a hundred years ago?”

“Then why via Mosaic? The interlocking Internets didn’t exist a hundred years ago,” insisted Trevor.

“Mosaic was only created twenty-five years ago when the last three Internets joined Global Central. The Emissary had to have come in the last quarter century.”

“We don’t know,” sighed Golmohammadi. His brain still throbbed.

“Then it might seem like something out of H. G. Wells,” Sadeqh returned in a soft voice.

“Don’t start with sci-fi stuff,” growled the brother. “This is just too serious.”

Sadeqh grew silent. He turned away from the others, typed something into his terminal. This had always been the way with the brothers. Arash had been strong, demanding. Sadeqh had been quieter, but working on another level than his older brother.

Colonel Golmohammadi led the others into another discussion of semantics and the time ticked away.

The phone rang. The General wanted Golmohammadi’s answer, now.

“General, I –“

It was Sadeqh who saved him, and consequently the entire Earth.

“Tell her it’s okay. The aliens are peaceful. We’ve found their Emissary.”

“How do you know?”

“I do. I can prove it. Just tell her –“

Golmohammadi looked into his brother’s eyes and said, “They’re peaceful, Mam. We’ve cracked the message.”

“Very good,” the General’s voice softened. “Meet me at the Airlock Eleven.”

Golmohammadi hung up, turned to face Sadegh. “I hope you’re – “

“You better hurry. The General’s waiting.”

*

The pneumatic doors hissed open allowing the Golmohammadi brothers onto the walkway. At the end of the long corridor the President of Earth was greeting the newly arrived aliens. The extraterrestrial ship had landed without trouble. The General’s missiles had remained in their silos. Arash Golmohammadi broke into a sweat just thinking about it. What if he had been wrong?

“Sadegh, you must explain to me how you know.”

The younger brother grinned. It wasn’t often he felt he had one up on his successful, older brother. A brother who was apt to be promoted after this encounter.

“It was Tamara who got me thinking on the right line. Alien contact is the stuff of Science Fiction. Or at least it had been until 2053 when the Rigellians came.”

Arash snorted. “You and that old-fashioned Buck Rogers stuff.”

“Laugh if you like, big brother. That Buck Rogers stuff just saved the entire planet. I figured if the aliens – and I really shouldn’t call them that any longer— had sent someone in recent times, the best vehicle to convert us to their cause would be stories of peaceful visitors. Their very nature might frighten us, so someone had to come first to prepare us. An Emissary. That person had to be a science fiction writer.”

“Okay, but which one?”

“That was the hard part, but with the I-Net I generated a list of possible suspects: Murray Leinster, Hugh Walters, Carl Sagan, Garrison Deufeld... all key writers of “first contact” stories. But a thematic study showed me there were no authors who were solely “pro-alien”. I ran another search on other themes. This Emissary would have to be largely known for one theme with a few red herrings in the mix to throw off suspicion. I got one theme — and several writers.”

“But that’s not really proof.”

“No, but it narrowed the field. I had to choose between Eando Binder, Isaac Asimov and Xena Silver-Strange.”

“I follow you, but which one? None of them wrote in the last twenty-five years. How did you decide which was the Emissary?”

“I figured there had to be a clue, a riddle hidden within the career of the writers, a subtle sign for those who looked. I found it.”

“Which one?”

“Let me tell it my way,” Sadegh laughed. “I started with Eando Binder. He seemed likely. The name was a combination of Earl and Otto Binder, two brothers. I tried anagrams of Eando, but nothing.

‘Strange’ seemed the next obvious. ‘Strange’ can be a meaning of ‘alien’, only I had ruled out that the aliens were ‘aliens’. ‘Xena’ could be related to ‘Xenophile’ meaning “lover of the strange’. I thought I had my answer.”

“But—“ supplied Arash, eating up distance with a stiff walk. He could hear the procession ahead. The President of Earth would meet the aliens any minute now...

“But I couldn’t disregard my least favorite choice: Isaac Asimov.

The ‘Good Doctor’ sounds peaceful too.

“Better hurry. I’ve got to explain it all to General Ballista right after the reception.”

“I eliminated Xena because of the word ‘Xenophobe’, which is ‘hater of the strange’. Eando Binder, odd as it was, really didn’t offer anything though amusing.”

“That left Asimov. His Foundation stories.”

Sadegh raised an eyebrow.

“Didn’t think I knew that, eh?” asked the older brother.

“Foundations are sturdy. I think I see.”

“Good but not good enough. Asimov was also a notorious mystery lover and writer. He left a puzzle to test our intelligence.”

“Where?”

“In his initials. ‘I. A.’”

“I don’t see it.”

“Artificial Intelligence.”

“That’s ‘A. I.’, not ‘I. A.’”

“Yes, but Ike also wrote as ‘Paul French’. In French, artificial intelligence is ‘intelligence artificiel’.

“And Mosaic? Asimov died fifty years before it was even thought of.”

“It never was about the Mosaic I-Net. Isaac Asimov is an anagram of ‘As via Mosaic’.”

The two brothers arrived at the last checkpoint. Their ID checked and scanned, the two men stepped onto the ramp to the airlock where the President of Earth waited for the visitors.

“You see, brother, our visitors aren’t aliens at all. They’re—“

They arrived just in time to see the President shake a cold robotic hand.

For a Little Price

Tom Ligon

An anthology that starts strong (and if Lucius's story was not strong, I don't know what strong is), it better end strong. So here is Tom Ligon with an original novella of the strong kind. I would like to thank Tom for sending this story my way and for revising it further at my request.

Tom Ligon is an engineering technologist, a proponent of Bussard's Inertial Electrodynamic Fusion method, and a noted Analog writer of fiction and non-fiction.

[Tom also contributed a back-story – a fascinating insight into the writing of this story. It is appended at the end. Don't forget to read it.]

From the Confessions of Abdul Abu-Lahab:

Before I begin my confession, it is necessary that you understand completely the magnitude of my crime. My cohorts and I could easily have destroyed the entire world, or held it hostage. But for a scattered few outposts, we could have exterminated humanity. There were those among us who thought it was an excellent idea. We presumed to wield the power of God.

I am, you see, one of the accomplices in the seizure of the starship The Starry-Eyed Dreamer. That which was created as a tool to break down the barriers of space, like any other tool, can also serve as a weapon. A starship, capable of traveling faster than light, commands power so great that there can be no defense against it. Had we gained control over that ship, we could have turned the surface of this world into a sea of molten rock.

The band of criminals to which I belong calls itself the Shia Ali, the Party of Ali. As we intended, your narrow-minded world has come to identify us as the Shi'ih's, or Shiites. Do not confuse us with that party of the faithful who follow

the true Path of God, who rightfully bear this precious name. As you would expect of criminals such as we, we coveted the great value and power of that sacred jewel, and stole it.

For those who follow the Path, God has prescribed tolerance, compassion, and forgiveness. They exercise charity, honesty, morality, and justice. They are good people. Who, then, are we, and what tumble of cobbles do we tread? Read on, and learn at last whom it is that you curse.

The Gauntlet

Janet Arnold waited nervously outside the office of the Director of Research, floating in a slight crouch and grasping a handhold tighter than necessary. Her hands were sweaty. At stake was a job she had dreamed of for years. To get it, she would have to face an interview which, according to the prevailing mythology, would have tripped up Einstein.

Jan had the academic credentials for the position, and had passed all the standard tests and routine interviews. So had a number of others, some with higher scores. To compensate, Jan had studied every scrap of available technical information she could find on the starship *The Starry-Eyed Dreamer*. This last hurdle, she knew, would test her knowledge of the ship, her space-sense, and her ability to think on her feet.

The corridor was unique. There were no others like it on this ship or any she had ever been aboard, yet it was somehow vaguely familiar. While the rest of the ship was cramped and packed with utilitarian paraphernalia, this corridor was wider, boxlike, and plain, more like one from a hotel than a research vessel. The door to the office itself was unusual ... it was a pair of sliding panels rather than a conventional hatch. There was a panel beside it about chest-height with a few buttons and some flashing lights. She could not guess its function.

Jan was mildly startled when the door opened suddenly with a soft “swish”. A haggard young man floated out, gave her a long, sad look, and said, “good luck.”

A high-pitched and craggy voice from within the office called out. “Next victim.”

Jan tugged at her sleeves, wiped the sweat from her hands against her pants, and

pushed off to float expertly through the door. Inside, floating casually behind a workstation, was the legendary Dr. Erica Thompson. Jan knew she was old, but was shocked to see just how old the famous physicist looked in person. She noticed Dr.

Thompson was wearing the same battered old computer on her left forearm that Jan had always seen in her pictures.

“Name?”

“Janet T. Arnold, ma’am.”

She frowned. “You get married or something? I was expecting a Janet Arnold, not a Janet T. Arnold-Maam.”

Jan suspected the sarcastic remark was intended to throw her off-balance. Instead, it destroyed the stuffy image she had of one of the most formidable intellects in the history of science. She smiled and relaxed. “I’m Jan Arnold.”

Dr. Thompson looked her over. “So, you think you’d like to serve on The Starry-Eyed Dreamer, do you?”

Jan nodded. “Yes, as a matter of fact I’d like that very much.”

Dr. Thompson eyed her for a moment. “The last four applicants said they’d ‘be honored’. Just for consistency, let’s get something clear from the start: this is a job, not an honorarium. I’ll work your butt off. So, why do you think you’d like that?”

Jan shrugged. “Hard work is fine if it’s interesting. Give me a challenge and I’d rather work on it than play.”

“Good answer, if you mean it,” the old woman countered.

“However, I think you should know that, of the original crew of this ship, I am the only one still serving on her. The rest all burned out.

Most last two to five years, then move on to something less demanding and more lucrative. But let’s get down to business.

“I don’t care what the UN says, The Starry-Eyed Dreamer is my ship. I designed it, I built it, I named it after myself, and I’ve called it home for fifteen years. The people who pull the purse-strings can schedule the missions and designate the payloads. The commander is welcome to drive it and worry about fuel, spare parts, and paperwork.

I’ll even put up with a bunch of space-sick dirtsiders taking their instrument packages for a joy-ride, as long as they pay the bills and stay out of my way. Those things mean nothing. This is an exploration ship, I am the Chief Explorer, and you would be my slave.

I start getting cranky if my slaves don’t gratify me with a minimum of one fantastic finding a day.”

Jan nodded. “I’m here for discovery.”

Dr. Thompson continued. “I am also, of course, the inventor of the c-prime engines which make faster than light travel possible.

Some people say I opened Pandora’s box. What do you think?”

Jan thought for a second. Dr. Thompson evidently preferred direct and truthful answers, which were the type Jan preferred to give.

“They’re probably right, but I’m glad you did. There’s a lot of neat stuff in there. If a committee had been in charge, it would probably still be under discussion.”

Dr. Thompson smiled slyly and wagged a finger. “Except, of course, that we’d all be dead by now, but that’s another story. As it is, I’ve apparently made the human race the most powerful force in these parts, although I must admit the competition is pretty sparse. Which brings us to the main point of this interview. You want to be a crewmember on an irresistible force, and I take personal responsibility to be sure a force that great is used properly.” She glanced at her computer screen. “I see you’ve already signed the Star Traveler’s Oath. I hope you understand just how serious it is.”

Jan nodded. “Dead serious. And I would die before I let the ship fall into the wrong hands, or be used as a weapon of mass annihilation.”

“Umm”, Dr. Thompson noted, scrutinizing her supplicant. “Tell me, you ever

hear of a fellow named Hyman G. Rickover?”

“The father of the U.S. Navy nuclear submarine force back in the middle of the twentieth century,” Jan replied. “He was noteworthy for a number of things, but I’m particularly grateful to him for not blowing up the world.”

Dr. Thompson nodded. “The very one. Well, he used to give each of his officers a little test to see if they were fit to serve in his irresistible force. So here’s your test.

“The Dreamer is returning to Earth under c-prime, has completed the dog-leg and is in-bound and decelerating. Unfortunately, the coffee that day is worse than normal, and instead of just tasting like it could kill, it actually does, wiping out everyone on the ship but you.

In the process of gasping his last breath, the helmsman throws up all over the helm, shorting it out in a dazzling shower of sparks and putting the ship on a course directly for Earth.”

“Um,” Jan interrupted, “the helm is fully photonic. Can’t short out.”

“Shut up,” the old woman snapped. “This is my story. So there you are, hurtling toward Earth, ass-first, FTL, engines blazing. The trajectory should bring you to a stop just above the atmosphere just long enough to wipe out everyone on that side of the planet plus God-knows-what other damage, then propel you back into space. At some point you will run out of fuel while going FTL, and when the engine quits, the Higgs field will collapse, radiation pressure and interstellar gas and dust will destroy the ship, and you’ll die anyway. You don’t have the command codes, and so you can’t control the c-prime system except to shut it down. What are you going to do? You have thirty seconds to answer.”

Jan thought for a few seconds. “Well, I suppose I could just kill the engines immediately and destroy the ship, but then the debris would probably still wreak havoc on Earth. But if I wait until the ship drops sub-light, then kill the engines, I’ll still have control of the fusion motors and maneuvering system, so I’ll be able to avoid hitting the planet. I’ll also be able to call a Mayday, and maybe they can send another starship to help. With luck I’ll save the ship and myself, too.”

Dr. Thompson looked at Jan in disgust. “Damn. First right answer all day. You

smart-asses take all the fun out of this test.

You're hired. Have your gear brought on board."

From the Confessions:

At the risk of making excuses, I will begin my story from my youth. Perhaps you will feel that I am a stereotype, and I suppose I am. I was trained to be that stereotype. But how well do you really know that type, or the many others which comprise my culture?

I chose my new name only recently, and have gone by several over my lifetime. Back then I went by the name Shahid Kahlid. Zeid Qoli and I were best friends from early childhood. As young boys, we played with plastic toy soldiers, setting fire to the Shah's forces and to those of the Great Satan. Later, we progressed to throwing rocks at the monarch's goons. We thought alike back then. We quoted the Koran, and we hated the Peacock Throne.

We joined the Shia Ali together. We could not have been more than sixteen, and the time was growing ripe for the Second Islamic Revolution. Oh, how we longed for battle against our persecutors!

We did not have long to wait.

We went into combat as so many martyrs had done before, barefoot and armed only with faith and burning hatred. We both acquired weapons with the impact of a single mortar round, at the price of the lives of several armed comrades. We won that battle, fearless on account of our boiling blood, and were hailed as heroes for the feat of destroying a column of trucks. After the battle, Zeid found flesh and chips of bone from the hand of his rifle's previous owner imbedded in its stock. It was only then that the magnitude and danger of what we had just been through struck us. We found a secluded spot and wept.

Our bravery won us respect and praise, though, and that is an addictive brew to impressionable pups. We quickly adapted to the horrors of war, and hardened ourselves into efficient killers. We already hated the enemy, and it was easy to consider them subhuman.

Our own losses became easier to accept with the doctrine that the fallen faithful

were assured a place in Paradise.

Our most memorable exploit during the revolution was the assassination of the mayor of a heavily guarded town near Birjand who refused to join us. We left him hanging in the center of town as a warning to those who would follow him. The mission didn't bother me, except for the lingering sensation of a spurt of the traitor's warm blood which struck me on the hand. The grizzly details and modus operandi we were instructed to use seemed to have a sobering effect on Zeid, though.

Grapes

Janet Arnold floated in front of her workstation, electret patches on the knees of her jumpsuit holding her in place against a pair of rests under the edge of the console. The seat, nearly useless except when the ship was accelerating, was retracted against the floor.

Around her, others were similarly occupied.

Jan was studying a computer screen intently, her mind focused on a particularly productive train of thought. There is a magical condition programmers experience in which the whole system comes together in their minds, producing a clarity of thought that enables them to overcome obstacles with ease which, moments earlier, had seemed insurmountable. Janet had been in such a state for five hours.

Immune from distraction by the constant stream of trivial background events which pervades starship life, she was totally unaware of the tiny white sphere, just a centimeter and a half in diameter, which was floating slowly but purposefully in her direction, trailing tendrils of white vapor. The tiny orb veered from its course momentarily as it passed through a stream of air emitted by a ventilation duct, but quickly compensated, homing on its intended victim.

Janet failed to notice the faint buzz of the four tiny fans which propelled the sphere, even when it hovered just behind her head, waiting for the right moment. She shrugged unconsciously, moving the collar of her loose-fitting jumpsuit away from her neck, giving the sphere the opening it needed. The orb eased slowly forward, through the gap, and down her back.

“OOOOHHHH-YIIIIIIEEEEEE!!!” Janet brought her knees up sharply, slamming her rump-first into the retracted chair. She rebounded and caromed off the ceiling, squirming in mid-air as she tried to dislodge the object. “Help! Dammit, somebody get that thing out of there!”

Titters of laughter came from the other stations in the lab, but no one offered assistance.

Janet launched herself toward the hatch, grabbed the frame with one hand, and swung down the corridor toward a rest-room faster than is normally considered prudent when weightless. She kept her back arched the whole time, and tried to use centrifugal force to keep the frigid object off her bare skin.

Moments later she returned, wearing a wicked grin and holding the sphere in a pair of pliers. “OK, jokers, payback time.” She squeezed until the shell of the device shattered and the works were mangled well beyond repair. She stuffed the mashed device into a waste bin, and returned to her station.

“I hope you guys are happy. I was just getting into sync with this stellar convection routine ... finally making a little progress.”

“Janet,” a female technologist working at the station next to Janet asked quietly, “do you know what time it is?”

Janet shrugged. “I dunno, Paula. Eighteen hundred?” She glanced at her watch. “Omigosh, twenty-forty. I almost missed dinner. Damn, and I’m so close. Just five more minutes and ...”

Paula switched Janet’s terminal off as Janet reached for it. “Be honest. Isn’t that what you said to yourself about ten minutes after your shift ended?”

Janet said nothing, but recognition was evident in her expression.

“I don’t know who ‘graped’ you, but they did you a favor. Go to dinner.”

“What did you say? ‘Graped’ me?”

Paula nodded. “That little toy you just scrunched is called a grape. Somebody down in the microfab shop dreamed them up a couple of years ago. Since then, graping has become sort of an initiation rite for new crewmembers. Evidently,

you were treated to the frozen grape variation. Go to dinner, before there's nothing left to eat but peanut butter and popcorn cakes."

From the Confessions:

After the victory, Zeid and I were rewarded with scholarships to a major American university. We studied together for five years, earning Masters' degrees in our respective engineering fields. Both of us studied as much space science as we could fit into our schedules, in part because, like so many youngsters, we were captivated by the grand successes that had been so recently achieved, and because the Shia Ali encouraged it.

Following our graduation, Zeid and I began our formal training as Defenders of the Revolution, or what the rest of the world calls terrorists. Initially, we studied doctrine. Pavlov would have recognized the study methods. Like one of his dogs trained to salivate at the sound of a bell, we were conditioned to spout rhetoric in response to any number of stimuli. Our reward was lavish praise from our instructors for each correct response.

We moved on to tactical exercises, which consisted primarily of training in skills needed for assassinations and gaining control of ships and aircraft. We spent a considerable amount of time learning the methods of intimidation that allow a small band to control a large number of people. It became easy once we realized what cowards most infidels are, and how affected they are by death or the threat of it. A typical exercise might start with a number of melon-headed mannequins seated in rows of folding chairs: it was great fun to blast the heads off of a few to start the exercise, sending a shower of melon-rind, flesh, and seeds through the air. One could just imagine the cooperation such persuasion could foster.

Then came the counter-revolution, which washed over the country like a tidal wave. We were powerless to stop it. Deluded by promises of an easy life, and a return of the "benefits" of outside culture, the population was seduced into backing the son of the former Shah. These were desperate times, and they called for strong action.

Our first assignment was a simple one, and not too far outside of our experience: we took control of a bus in the bastard state of Israel-Palestine. In exchange for the lives of the Palestinian workers on the bus, whom we considered to be collaborators of the worst sort, we took the mayor, a noted figure in the

reconciliation of Palestinians and the Zionists. What we left of him wasn't a pretty sight.

Following that, we took an Italian airliner. After landing it in the desert of Libya, we destroyed it and most of the two hundred and seventy occupants with a bomb. In that one attack, we managed to retaliate against Italy for assisting the Shah, embarrass the Secretary General (a Libyan), and instigate a reprisal by the European Defense Alliance against Syria, who had not had any role at all in it. The mess that stirred up served to deepen the schism between Muslims and the west for years.

Zeid and I were honored by Shia Ali for our role in the hijacking of the airliner. I basked in the glory, but Zeid was deeply troubled by it. He retired to his home for a month, where he immersed himself in the Koran. I tried to make him understand the justice in what we had done, but for every bit of rhetoric I offered, he would counter with a holy verse. He could not believe that our victims deserved the fiery fate we had sentenced them to, and I could not believe the interpretations he was putting on verses I could recite by heart.

The Inquisition

The Dreamer was on layover at Earth. The engine and personnel hulls were separated to allow cargo access for a Thompson Gate wave generator scheduled to be installed in a nearby star system, and dockwallopers were wrestling the oversized device into the bay.

Since only minimal power was available from the personnel hull APUs, the crew found itself with an unexpectedly light work load.

Some were busy with routine maintenance, and some used the time to catch up on pet projects with lower than normal priorities, but all had some free time for amusement.

Erica Thompson was unhappy, and explained the fact in detail to Commander Rajpal, who bore the burden stoically.

"Damn the bureaucrats, Raj, what do they think the Dreamer is, a cargo ship? The last time we had a slack-time layover like this, somebody invented grapes," she complained. "Idle hands, and all that, you know."

The commander smiled. While he wouldn't admit it, he thought grapes were amusing, and added to the mystique and tradition of the most unique ship in the fleet. "You're the one who designed the wave generators so they would just fit in the Dreamer's hold. I think I told you at the time you probably ought to make them just a little too big.

So, you think the crew is up to some mischief?"

"This time, they got into my collection of old science fiction videos," Erica moaned. "Have you heard them down there?"

"They seem to be enjoying themselves," the commander answered. "And don't forget, you donated the collection to the ship's library."

"Well, yeah," Erica admitted, "but I intended for them to give a little insight about how difficult it is to predict the future. They're history, in a way. Those cretins are howling at them as if they're hilarious."

"Well ... ," the commander paused, trying to think up a diplomatic way of phrasing the reply, before remembering to whom he was speaking, "aren't they? Face it, Erica, they're pretty bad, even considering their age."

"They're classics," she barked, but then she thought for a while.

"Well most of them, anyway." She thought some more, and tried to remember any she didn't think she could have done better. "Maybe just a few. Oh, hell, you're right. I suppose I should be happy they're showing any interest in my old-lady stuff at all."

A call came over the intercom for the commander. "Sir, there's a shuttle approaching that wants permission to dock."

Commander Rajpal looked at Erica. "Are you expecting someone I don't know about?"

Erica shrugged. "Not I."

"Ask them what their business is," the commander replied to the intercom.

A moment passed before the reply. "They say they have some VIP's aboard who

want a tour.”

Erica’s thin grey eyebrows arched up. “Oh, hell. Just what we need. The ship’s a mess, the crew is goofing off, and we’re up for a budget review. Aren’t they supposed to arrange these things in advance?”

Commander Rajpal frowned. “Exactly. And they usually do.

This is very suspicious.” He keyed the intercom. “Permission denied.

Tell them, with my sincere personal apologies, that they must go through proper channels.”

The commander arched a black eyebrow at Erica as they waited for a reply. “I smell a rat. This is probably a surprise security inspection.”

“Sir,” said the voice on the intercom, “they say they’re a security inspection team, and this is a surprise inspection. They repeat their request to come aboard.”

“Permission still denied,” Raj replied. “Tell them to park it until they go through proper channels.” He released the button and lowered his voice. “Those bastards are so predictable they make me cry. Erica, we’ve got about one minute before their authorization comes through, and another fifteen or so until they dock. Let’s see what we can whip into shape.”

The inspectors boarded sixteen minutes later, presented their credentials, and demanded to be taken straight to the bridge.

Boarding was by the main radiation trap in the cargo bay at the rear of the personnel hull, and the bridge was the forward or top deck, depending on your perspective of the ship. That meant they would have an impromptu tour of the ship on the way.

They passed the crew lounge, which was empty, but the video system was blaring scenes from a science fiction movie from the previous century. Erica’s cheeks flushed as the inspectors made notes and shook their heads. They peered into a berthing area, which was in disarray despite the hurried efforts of a few crewmembers to clean up. In the labs, panels and consoles were apart, awaiting modifications. More notes.

Finally they arrived at the bridge, where the inspectors began furiously scribbling. They conferred for a moment, then asked to see engineering, all the way back on the bottom deck. They conducted a more thorough inspection on the way down.

They paused outside Erica's lab suite.

"Open it up," the chief inspector demanded.

"Like hell," Erica replied in a pleasant voice with a curt smile.

"And why not?" the inspector demanded.

"Same reason you can't go through my underwear drawer," Erica replied. "That is my personal lab. Nobody goes in there without my explicit permission. No spies, no terrorists, no gawking visitors, no nosy inspectors."

The inspector scowled. "How are we supposed to find security problems if we can't inspect?"

"If you can't even get in, then it seems to me there couldn't be a security problem," Raj offered, and directed the inspectors aft.

In engineering, they took more notes, then accessed a computer to study selected features of the ship's plans.

Finally, they demanded a private meeting with Commander Rajpal and Dr. Thompson.

"Well," Raj asked glumly, "what are your findings?"

The chief inspector shook her head. "Just as we expected.

Terrible, just terrible. Plenty of serious violations of the usual sort.

Open consoles to invite sabotage, unsecured and unattended labs, terminals left on-line, that sort of thing. More serious, however, is the nature of the ship itself." She looked at Dr. Thompson. "And that is her fault."

"What?!! My fault?!!" Erica was unsure if she wanted to strangle the inspector

with her bare hands or just stuff her into the recycling system.

“The basic design is flawed,” the chief inspector continued. “The central decks are full of crowded dedicated labs and facilities. The only decks suitable for installation of temporary mission equipment are engineering and the bridge. That means visiting researchers must have access to the two most security-sensitive parts of the ship. Dr.

Thompson, why did you design it that way?”

Erica rolled her eyes. “Criminy, the ship is sixteen years old, for crying out loud. It’s only the second starship I ever designed. Back then we figured only our own crew and maybe a few carefully screened guests would be doing the research, so it didn’t matter.

Besides, the engineering deck has the best access to power and the cargo hold, and the bridge has the best access to the sensor array.”

“You could have designed separate sections on both decks,” the assistant inspector countered. “The bridge is far larger than it needs to be. No other ship in the fleet has one like it. And your engineering section could have been split between two decks. Obviously you gave no consideration to security at all when you designed them.”

Erica scowled at the man. “I was thinking about starship security before you were born, possibly before your parents were born, and certainly for a long time before I designed the first starship. Now, I may have failed to take into account that the UN would use this ship as a tour bus for influential researchers and their pet programs, but I’ll guarantee you that this ship is as secure as any in the fleet.”

“We’re aware of your security design features, Dr. Thompson, and frankly, we think they are inadequate,” the chief inspector countered.

“You’re aware of the ones in the plans on file at UNASA,” Erica replied, her eyes narrowed to wrinkled slits. “I’ve installed others which you don’t know about.”

The inspectors raised their eyebrows in unison. “Care to elaborate?” the chief asked.

“I most certainly do not,” Erica replied. “You would put that information in a big report, stamp “SECRET” on it, and make a copy available to every ambassador who asked for it. The thing would probably be published in Jane’s by the end of the year.”

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After getting rid of the inspectors, Erica and Raj met again.

Raj started the conversation. “I must admit, Erica, I’ve always wondered about the bridge layout myself. Why did you make it so big?”

Erica look chagrined. “If you really must know, go look at those old videos. I grew up watching Star Trek. It’s just the way I always thought a bridge should look. And, naturally, I always assumed most of the research program activity would center on those two areas.”

“What about your secret security measures? I only know of a few that UNASA doesn’t have on file. You haven’t been holding out on the skipper, have you?”

“Frankly, I’ve always relied on good people who’d be willing to put their lives on the line rather than lose control of a machine this powerful. That, coupled with the standard security built into the ship, should be plenty.”

“Let’s examine that,” Raj said thoughtfully. “There’s no way to hot-wire the engines. Every aspect of their operation is controlled by local processors which won’t do a thing without proper authority from three command-level personnel, two on the bridge and one in engineering. You’d have to have a conspiracy of three such people in order to use the ship as a weapon.”

“Or they’d have to be coerced by hijackers,” Erica added. “But any crewmember can suppress the engines from almost any console on the ship.”

Raj nodded. “And, of course, the bridge and engineering will isolate automatically if there’s any security alarm. What else can we do?”

“Beef up the human part of the equation,” Erica replied. “The only way around the security is to coerce the crew into operating the c-prime system. I don’t think the crew would allow it, but I suppose it would help morale if they thought a rescue were possible.”

“But we can’t depend on outside assistance, of course,” Raj added, “since you haven’t gotten around to inventing c-prime communications yet.”

“Gimme a while, will ya? I’m working on it.” Erica said defensively. “We need to train some security teams in defense and rescue tactics. Let’s figure some of the ways hijackers would try to subdue us, and design countermeasures.”

“Well,” Raj said after a few moments of thought, “you were complaining that the crew had too much time on their hands. I think we can take care of that.”

From the Confessions:

I was called to the office of Jamil Al-Hariri, the very left hand of the one who calls himself Mahdi. At first I was afraid, more for Zeid than for myself. Had his sudden softening been noticed? Would it be held against him? What would the punishment be?

Jamil was late for the appointment. I was left alone in the office of one of the most powerful individuals I could imagine, surrounded by things I knew I must not touch. I didn’t know if I should feel honored or terrified. I was both. The temptation to glance at the papers on his desk was great, but I resisted. I studied the titles of the volumes on the shelves lining his walls, but dared not take any down.

As time passed, however, I felt bolder. I noted that most of the texts, a ton or more of them, were dusty and evidently never touched.

They seemed to be largely religious decorations. A small group near his desk showed signs of frequent and recent use, however. I noted the titles. The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich was one. Hitler, a Study in Tyranny was right beside it. Machiavelli’s Prince and Discourses were particularly well-worn. There were also other studies of some of the vilest examples of western political history. I wondered what they were doing there, but concluded that it probably came under the general heading of “knowing thine enemy.” There were also several reprints from psychology journals, whose titles I could not read, but whose reference numbers I copied down.

I also noted a large, leather-bound, untitled volume on Jamil’s desk. Its cover was well-worn and its pages darkened from many hands. I was seriously

considering taking a peek, when Jamil came into the room. I nearly fainted when he noticed where my attentions had been directed. He whisked the book into his desk.

“Sit down.”

I complied.

“You did well last month,” he said with little emotion.

“Brilliantly, in fact.”

“Thank you, sir,” I replied with a dry mouth. The praise felt good, but his demeanor was hard to read.

“Your friend, Zeid ... he is ... alright?”

“Sir?”

“I have heard that he let it get to him. That he may no longer be effective.”

In one breath I told an absolute truth and an absolute lie. “Sir, the mission has strengthened his faith in ways that surprise me.”

Jamil scowled. “We’ll see. There will be time enough. And you?”

“I am ready for anything, anywhere, at any time.”

“Are you so sure?” I thought I saw him smile.

“Absolutely. I am totally dedicated to the cause.”

“Then I order you to get a job.” I was right, it was a definite smile.

“Sir?”

“This is where we really test your dedication, my young friend.”

He pulled a folder from his desk and pushed it toward me. “We have arranged for you to receive a crash course in a field close to your academic specialty. In a few months, God willing, we expect a position to come available which you will

be uniquely suited to fill.

In the coming years you will work your way into a position advantageous to us.”

He motioned for me to open the folder. I did so, amid feelings of shock at so great a change in assignments. I was ready for action, and did not wish to be chained to a desk for years. But I read the assignment summary dutifully, and as I did, a smile crept onto my lips. The job was in space!

“You accept, then?” Jamil asked.

“You know I do, sir!”

“Good. Here is a similar assignment for Zeid, if you are certain we can count on him.”

“I’ll give it to him, sir. I know he will be pleased.” Of that much I was sure.

The Calling

Jan peeked into the office. Paula and Dr. Thompson were already there. She slid timidly through the hatch and anchored herself to a handhold opposite to them.

“You wanted to see me?”

Paula glanced down the corridor and pushed the hatch closed.

“We need to discuss your work.”

“Uh-oh.”

Paula gritted her teeth for a moment, then began. “Jan, you are one of the most gifted programmers I have ever worked with.”

“This is about my last program, isn’t it?”

Paula nodded. “Fraid so. Good thing we caught it before putting it to use.”

Jan looked from Paula to Erica and back to Paula. “I told you I thought it was over my head!”

Paula nodded again. “You did. My fault for not listening. I thought you could handle it. In a lot of ways, it is a nice piece of work ...”

“Very nice,” Erica interrupted. “Tightest written, best commented piece of code I’ve seen in a long time. Didn’t take but five minutes to find the problem. Which is that you evidently haven’t the slightest grasp of general c-prime relativity.”

Paula winced. “Well, actually you do seem to have a fairly good command of special relativity and the c-prime extensions, and I could tell you’d made an effort to learn the general case equations.

Unfortunately, you made some errors and omitted some considerations. They were the sort of mistakes I’d expect a freshman physics major to make when tackling a graduate-level problem.”

“Humph,” Erica snorted. “I derived general c-prime relativity when I was in Junior High. Of course, I am a genius.” She added a theatrical grin and a toss of her head.

Paula swung the back of her hand at Erica’s face, just missing her.

“Whap. Behave yourself, old woman.”

Jan grinned.

Paula cracked a smile. “So is almost every member of the crew, Jan included,” she said, looking at Erica. “Nevertheless, I doubt if ten percent of them could do this math without tutoring.” She turned back to Jan. “But that still leaves us in a bind. Right now, we need a programmer who can hack this math.”

“I’ll work with you for a couple of days to straighten this program out,” Erica injected. “Long term, though, I’m afraid we’re going to have to reassign you.”

“Which presents a problem,” Paula added. “Jan, I’ve always been impressed with your general knowledge of the ship’s systems.

Unfortunately, you don’t have enough specialized expertise in any particular system, other than the computers, to let us reassign you to a technical specialty post. And we’re already fully staffed with computer experts.”

“But,” Erica chimed in with a wicked grin, “we do have a nasty little job which Paula, Raj, and I have been kicking around between us.”

“I’ll clean the heads,” Jan offered. “I’ll do the windows.

Anything. I want to stay on.”

“Good, I was hoping you’d feel that way,” Erica replied. “But this job is even worse. Calls for someone who knows every nook and cranny of the ship, and how it all works. Calls for someone with good organizational skills. Calls for an innovator, particularly for someone who can think on their feet.”

Jan perked up. “That doesn’t sound so bad.”

Erica rolled her eyes. “You haven’t seen the mountain of bovine excrement regulations you’ll have to plow through to get it done, or dealt with the morons who’ll be expecting reports from you every time we head out.”

“Basically, we need someone to run security for the Dreamer,”

Paula explained. “And we think you can do it.”

“More to the point, we need someone with your skills who is desperate enough to stay aboard that they’ll accept a non-science job,”

Erica added. “We particularly don’t want an outside specialist coming in and cramming a packaged program down our throats. We want someone the crew likes and respects, who can put something effective together that doesn’t interfere with our mission.”

Paula’s pager chimed. “Oops, another crisis. You two talk it over.”

“I accept,” Jan exclaimed as Paula left.

“Good,” Erica replied. “But first I need to test your practical knowledge on a couple of subjects where your math is weak. Those happen to be exactly the phenomena that make starships dangerous.

First off, tell me your understanding of exactly what a Higgs field is.”

Jan thought for a minute. “Well, the visible Universe is basically a Higgs field. It establishes the limited ranges of the nuclear strong and weak forces. It also sets the speed of light. I guess you could say it’s sort of a ‘stasis field’.”

“Okay,” Erica said with a curt nod. “What can you tell me about the Higgs field that protects the ship?”

“Oh, that’s similar to the Universal Higgs field. It’s our bubble of local relativity, and forms naturally whenever the engines are running in c-prime mode. It isolates us from normal spacetime, and protects us from radiation, gas, and dust. Cerenkov radiation forms inside when we intercept matter or light, which is why we have trineutronium shielding on the ship.”

Erica nodded again. “And how does the Universal Higgs Field differ from the Higgs field in a fusion reactor or a ship’s engine?”

“Those are modified versions of the Higgs fields found in superconductors. They have the opposite effect to the Universal kind.

They reduce the range of the electromagnetic force and extend the range of the strong and weak forces, increasing reaction cross-sections.”

“Close enough,” Erica acknowledged. “Did you realize that you used the reactor equations in your program where you should have used the Universal forms?”

“Oops.” Jan put her right hand over her eyes.

“Oops is right.” Erica evil-eyed Jan, who was peeking between her fingers.

“Good thing it doesn’t really happen that way, or we’d blow up every time we fired up the main engines. Now tell me about normal space, outside the ship’s field.”

“An outside observer can’t actually see the ship or even the field when we’re FTL. Instead, the observer sees the effects of the ship’s passage. The ship produces a wake of electromagnetic radiation which propagates from the point of passage. The observer sees a flash as it passes, and that flash appears to move both in the direction of travel and in the direction from which the ship came.”

“Anything else?”

“Oh, yes. The ship appears to have an illegally high mass due to its enormous kinetic energy. There is a strong gravitational pulse, as if a black hole had just gone by at the speed of light.”

“You left out that equation,” Erica said, arching an eyebrow. “I wanted to be sure you knew about the effect. Know why it is important?”

“Because it can muck the dickens out of normal spacetime, Jan replied. “Not to mention knocking the observer on his butt.”

“It can do more than that,” Erica added. “We tested it on an asteroid once. We didn’t just vaporize it, we triggered a fusion reaction that turned part of its mass into heavy elements. A close pass to a planet would cause a massive nuclear explosion in the atmosphere. It would be enough to disrupt the planet’s crust. All life would be cooked in minutes. But snuggled inside their Higgs field and shielded with trineutronium, the starship crew would only feel a mild jolt. Of the four basic ways you can use a starship as a weapon of mass destruction, that one scares me the most.”

Jan grimaced. “In the movies, they usually have a suicide squad try to ram the planet. My God, it is incredible that you could do something that awful and barely feel a jolt.”

Erica nodded sadly. “And your job is to see that it never happens. Ultimately, it is Commander Rajpal’s responsibility, of course, so you will technically be his assistant. As a practical matter, you can expect to be tripping over me at every turn, since I have, as you might expect, a fairly strong interest in the subject. You will be stuck with the unenviable tasks of sorting out the paperwork. More important, you will have to implement day-to-day measures against a threat the average crewmember thinks can never happen. If you can’t find a way to make the program innocuous, you’ll encounter a lot of resistance. If you can’t find a way to make it effective, we don’t need you.”

From the Confessions:

As I waited to launch to my new job in space, I stopped at the Houston Spaceport Bookstore to buy some reading material for the long voyage. On my own at last, I was finally free to explore some of the titles I had seen in Jamil’s office. I found them easily, and downloaded them onto a data crystal. I bought a

new reader, amazed at how advanced it was compared to the ancient thing I had used at the University.

On the initial part of my journey I was as fascinated as a child, captive to the wonder and beauty of spaceflight. Earth, viewed from the trans-orbital shuttle, is so breathtakingly beautiful and its scale is so grand that no photograph can ever do it justice. The backdrop is infinity. You can feel the endlessness. The stars are such sharp pinpoints, and there are so unbelievably many of them that the senses are overwhelmed.

The fusion transport ride to the Solar Polar Orbit Laboratory, however, was long and boring. Once Earth faded from sight, and only that infinite cold blackness surrounded us, I could get as much stargazing as I needed in about five minutes a day. I had plenty of time to read.

First, I read about Hitler. It comes as a constant surprise to westerners that many in the world of Islam admire him. He hated Jews, you see, and thought highly of those of Aryan stock. My own ancestors, the Bakhtiari, trace their lineage to the most ancient of Aryan peoples. It was with some surprise that I learned that Hitler thought the Nordic races were the true Aryans. Although he would no more admit this to them than he would admit to the Japanese that he considered them an inferior race, Persians he considered Arabs, and therefore Semites. I have always been doubtful that his treatment of the Jews was nearly as harsh as they claim, but I was shocked to learn that he persecuted the Gypsies as badly as the Jews claim to have been. The Gypsies are Aryans too. They lived in Persia from around the first century, and I probably bear their blood.

And of course, with his defeat, the remaining European Jews felt drawn together, and drawn toward the Palestine they had long since forsaken. Clearly, Hitler was, if not the father, certainly the uncle of Zionism. He quickly lost his former appeal to me.

I read quickly through the passages on Hitler's practice of putting himself on the defensive, accusing those who opposed him of outrageous wrongs against him and his cause, justifying a call for drastic actions in self-defense. These passages were unsettling to me, but I didn't recognize just why.

I learned about the harnessing of hatred against minorities, of hardening the population by repeated assertion of the rightness of persecution. I learned that

you could, by stages, condition a people to accept first the ridicule, then the dispossession, then the banishment, and finally the extermination of an unpopular minority. By acquiescing, they become accomplices in the lesser wrongs, and lose the moral authority to protest. Soon it becomes easier to accept heinously immoral deeds by others than to accept that you yourselves are morally weak. I accepted these facts as evidence of the monstrosity of the western powers in general, and typical of the tactics with which they had been able to dominate the righteous nations of Islam for so long. Was it any wonder then, that we had to resort to desperate tactics to fight them? I swept under my mental rug a momentary recognition of our treatment of the Baha'is and Kurds.

Next, I read Machiavelli's Prince. Expecting to find the ultimate in decadent western political philosophy, I found instead a primer for establishing an Islamic Republic. Some of his tactics were so unmistakable, I was appalled. It was as if the Mahdi had studied it word for word.

I learned, for example, that upon defeating a royal house, it is necessary to kill not only the ruler, but also his entire family, including the children. Failure to eliminate the heirs would be your downfall. Always the people love their royal families, no matter what their sins. For a while, the people may rant and riot, but in time they will long for the simple certainty of the old days. The king will return, or else his son.

I thought about our own history, and how true a prophesy this infidel told. One Shah out, and a call not only for his head, but that of his son. But the son escaped, cheated death, and eventually returned.

That son was banished by the Mahdi, with the same cry for his blood and that of the fruits of his loins. And now his son had returned.

I read about the ruling of the conquered. First, said the infidel, send them a ruler with an iron fist. Have him pummel them until they can do nothing but hate him. Then come yourself, and have the tyrant put to death. You will earn the love and loyalty of the masses.

I thought of the revolution, and the harshness of the revolutionary courts. I remembered the stories, as the revolution progressed, of the condemnations of judges, and executions of leaders.

I lost much sleep over Machiavelli, until finally I rationalized that he was merely

a reporter of tactics which work, and tactics which work are needed against enemies whose constant treachery, hostility, and greed are without limit. I did not notice it at the time, but my mental rug would no longer lie quite flat.

New, Improved Grapes

Hussein Daryadel studied the little orb he had just removed from his pants-leg, careful not to touch the short pin protruding from one side. That, he surmised, was the electrode that had just given him such a nasty shock. The sphere was yellow, with one hemisphere banded with black stripes, converging on the electrode. He spotted a seam in the shell, gave the gizmo a twist, and separated it into two halves.

Mike Graffo swung through the hatch and drifted overhead, stopping himself with a gentle touch against a display panel.

“Whatcha got, Hussein”?

“Guess I’m a full-fledged member of the crew now,” Hussein replied. “Unless I’m terribly mistaken, I’ve just been graped.”

Mike chuckled. “Beats some of the initiations mariners used to go through.”

“Oh?” Hussein replied. “Says who? This thing packs quite a punch. Nobody told me they were rigged for electrocution. Look, see? It has a little voltage inverter on it.”

Mike took the tiny device. “Damn, you’re right. Never seen one like that before. Usually they’re cold or wet. That’s one of the inverters we use to set off exploding bolts.” He slapped Hussein on the back. “Congratulations, you’re the first victim of a whole new tradition.”

Hussein eyed the device. “How’s this thing work, anyway?”

Mike pointed to a squat silver cylinder on one side. “The watch battery provides the power. There are four piezo fans arranged in a tetrahedron for directional thrust, and some myoelectric vanes to vector thrust for rotation. The chip’s got an IR receiver, computer, and an inertial reference nanoplatform.”

“I could see that much,” Hussein grunted. “What I really want to know is where

can I get a remote control for this bloody thing?”

“Oh, just execute GRAPECON on your terminal,” Mike replied.

“Should be pretty self-explanatory. Up, down, forward, back, sideways, pitch, roll, yaw.”

“I don’t see a camera on it,” Hussein observed. “How do you track your target?”

“You have to be able to watch both the grape and the victim,”

Mike admitted, “but, hell, what’s the point of graping someone if you’re not there to see it?”

After his shift, Hussein re-assembled the grape, found the control software, and spent half an hour learning to control the device. On a whim, he found a sheet of sensitized plastic used in passive detection of ionized particles and set a small piece of it adrift. He steered the grape in pursuit of the target, and zapped it repeatedly. Each shock left a black mark on the sensitized sheet.

Within two hours, Hussein had finished inventing killer-grape combat, soon to become one of the most popular diversions aboard the Dreamer. The object was to mark a small target on your opponent’s killer-grape before he marked yours.

It was popular, at least, until a year later, when somebody figured out that Erica Thompson had never been properly graped. After that episode, all killer-grapes were confiscated and locked in her lab, and strict controls were put on the supply of high-voltage inverters.

From the Confessions:

At my new job at SPOL, my duties were to complete a project begun by my predecessor, who had been dismissed over some nameless scandal. Whatever his faults, he was a meticulous professional, and my work was straightforward. The project was a specialized spectrometer designed to resolve certain fine lines of stellar emissions. On the surface, the assignment was mundane, but I knew, even then, that it held potential for the study of certain important astrophysical phenomena likely to involve travel to other stars.

Upon completing the project, I was promoted to team leader, and was assigned a

small staff to utilize the new instrument. I needed a technical writer, and one was quickly found for me. I knew something was afoot when Zeid showed up to fill the position.

Zeid had been at the station for about a month when his reader broke down. I lent him mine, not remembering that I had several crystals in the case with it. When I stopped by his berth to retrieve it later that day, I found him in rakatin. I was embarrassed, not having prayed myself in over a year. I admired him for doing what was right even when there was nobody around to know.

Since his arrival I had noticed that he had cheered up considerably, so his depression over our last mission was evidently behind him. Neither of us knew what our next mission was to be, but we couldn't imagine better circumstances for training.

At the moment, though, some of the old blue aura hung around him. "How are you?" I asked, a little less casually than the usual habitual question.

"I am afraid for our souls, Shahid," he replied. "Woe to us, we have done wrong," he quoted the Recitations.

What could I say that I had not already said many times? I thought for a while, my hand on his shoulder, then picked up my reader and left. I was concerned for him. I knew I should tell my superiors, but I could not imagine ending his brilliant career in such a disgraceful manner, when in my own dreams we fought, side-by-side, so gloriously against the enemies of our cause. I wondered if I would ever again see a day when we both stood before the cheering multitude as heroes.

Back in my berth, I noticed a crystal still in the slot. It contained the collection of materials I had made in Houston. I switched it on. It was paged to one of the psychology texts. I sat down to find out what had set off this latest bout of conscience.

The subject of the study was hostage psychology, which naturally pricked my interest. The hostage-takers in question were common criminals, though, not revolutionary justice-seekers. The researchers had determined, to my surprise, that the likelihood of a hostage being killed drops as the hostage-taker becomes more aware of the hostage as a person. A sympathetic recognition of the victim's humanity grows in the assailant. Authorities were advised to foster such

familiarity between the victim and captor in any way practical. It is difficult, the author said, to kill in cold blood once you become aware of the warmth of your victim's blood.

... the warmth of your victim's blood. How many times had I felt it by then? Twice? Three times? Half a dozen? I felt it right then, and it annoyed me, as it always had.

I continued reading. At the very end, the author advised that the study only applied to ordinary, unplanned barricade situations, not to planned hijackings by trained terrorists.

Oh, how I hated that word. How little understanding it showed!

My defenses raised instantly.

Trained terrorists, the report continued, have been deliberately hardened by their training. They have been taught to think of their hostages as unworthy subhumans and as guilty of unpardonable wrongs. They have been brutalized, often by almost ritualistic beating of effigies, and are used to the concept of inflicting pain and death.

Their reflexive response to humanitarian appeals is poisoned rhetoric.

That was about what I would expect, considering the source, I thought, salivating. How blind these westerners were, how insensitive to their own trespasses against us. How like them not to recognize their own guilt in acquiescing to the unthinkable depredations of their institutions! And how like unbelievers, to not see the folly of their ways!

There was a distinct lump growing under my mental rug, but I did not recognize it.

Annette

She caused quite a stir when she signed on. Annette was petite.

Annette was precious. Annette was friendly. Annette was French.

Ooh-la-la, and all that. (Truth is, Annette was Belgian, but that nationality didn't

come with a useful stereotype, and so she opted for a French stereotype.)

All the boys loved her. Well, lusted after her, but then, boys have always had some difficulty distinguishing between the two. Annette, on the other hand, had no such difficulty. For her, the two emotions were not separate things to be confused, but a continuum to be enjoyed. She had plenty of both to go around.

She loved all the boys in Engineering, where she worked. She loved the boys in the labs. She loved the boys on the bridge. The men, *i.e.* boys with wives, she stayed away from.

Starships are not considered bastions of moral fortitude, at least where sex is concerned. The missions are long, with limited outlets for entertainment. The tiny berths offer some privacy, but shared areas for dressing and bathing offered little. The workspace is so crowded that physical contact is frequent. The crews are usually young, splendidly healthy, and progressive-minded. Nevertheless, Annette's free love philosophy was not shared by everyone. Most of the women were at least a little jealous, and a few were more than that. Some of the boys got into fisticuffs over her.

Paula, by now the Chief of Technology, and boss to at least half the crew, felt no such jealousy. Where Erica Thompson was crotchety, Paula was compassionate. Where Erica was demanding, Paula was understanding. Paula was sensitive and caring, capable of listening, and worth listening to on those few occasions when she offered advice. Most of the crew regarded Paula as their friend, even as a mother-figure. Annette and Paula became close friends.

"Annette," Paula confided, "you really need to put the brakes on a little. You're causing trouble."

"Can I help it?" Annette replied with just a trace of the accent she would have poured on for the boys. "I like them, and they like me. Who are we hurting?"

"Well, Jeremy and Iheany got into it last week, Oury and Aaron before that. Jan told me she'd space you if you didn't stop flirting with Ron. Erica and the commander are considering transferring you to another ship."

"That's unfair," Annette protested. "What does that old woman know about the needs of a young girl?"

“Maybe more than you know,” Paula replied thoughtfully. “She gave me some advice once, when I asked her how she’d been able to stand all those years without a man.”

“You mean she’s never had a lover?” Annette was incredulous.

Paula shrugged. “Maybe, but if so it was a long time ago. Not since the Dreamer was built, anyway, and probably not for a long time before that. Anyway, Erica told me something she does to control the fires before they get out of hand.”

“Oh?” Annette listened intently, a delighted gleam in her eyes.

“What does she do?”

“She lucubrates. All night sometimes.” Paula noted the expression on Annette’s face, somewhere between lechery and confusion. “Look it up.”

From the Confessions:

I was aware of strings being pulled. I did not feel like a puppet myself, but it became evident, from the promotions and opportunities offered to me, that others around me were frequently being jerked around for my convenience. I was on an inexplicable fast-track. It felt good, but it also felt conspicuous, and I wondered if my colleagues were suspicious.

Zeid and I still had no idea what our real mission was. We knew that there was some push on to do close study of nearby stars, and that some of the technology we had developed would be needed for it.

But the idea of winning a coveted starship assignment was almost too much to hope for. It would be like an astronomer of the twentieth century getting a ride on the space shuttle: not too bizarre to dream about, but expecting it was a fairly reliable way to achieve disappointment. The odds seemed so long, we never even considered that our mission was anything of the sort.

We were both somewhat disappointed when Jamil instructed us to accept the offers that came to us, quite unsolicited. We hated leaving our interesting and challenging jobs in space for what seemed to be less promising but similar work on Earth. But, we were good soldiers, and we suspected there was something important in store for us.

Zeid and I arrived at the Columbian Solar Observatory, located in the remote highlands above the headwaters of the Amazon, on a mountain directly on the equator. The location was rugged and the sun was brutal. It was like coming home. We revelled in the climate while the Europeans fried in the un-attenuated high-altitude equatorial sunlight.

Like our home, the conditions were appallingly primitive, the result of subtle machinations by the United States in reprisal for Columbia's drug trade. The locals were desperately poor and their housing dilapidated. Medical care and sanitation were practically non-existent. The observatory was reached by a run-down bus over harrowing mountain roads.

Within a few months, other members of Shia Ali began to arrive, one at a time, and we knew Jamil's plan was coming together.

Dr. Kammholtz, the muddle-headed old fool in charge of the operation, shed little light on the subject of why we had been recruited. He assigned us no duties except for setting up our labs and teaching each other in a series of endless seminars, while he busied himself with some sort of wheeling and dealing involving, we took it, funding.

Zeid was still a mystery to me. One day he was himself, the next day he would go religious on me. I felt myself growing distant from him, in part because he, himself, didn't seem to like my company, and in part because I had other friends around me now. Why should I care if he wanted to throw away his future?

Jamil showed up in a nearby village, dressed, and looking, like a local. He had adopted some little-known but believable South American dialect and accent, and was paid little mind by the natives, who were by now used to strangers. I was the only member of the group permitted to see him. I was under strict orders to avoid any appearance of conspiracy.

The more distant I grew from Zeid, the closer I grew to Jamil.

He constantly told me what excellent work I was doing, and how valuable I was to the cause. I had never been close to my father, a man who never praised anyone but God, and felt as if I had found something I had been longing for all my life. I ate it up. Jamil's praise was what I lived for.

Still, I could not bring myself to be fully honest with Jamil about Zeid's

weakness. Not knowing our mission, I could not know if it would be something Zeid could deal with or not. I still thought he would come around, and did not want to ruin things for him unnecessarily.

Finally, one day Dr. Kammholtz emerged from his cloistered office suite with a grin on his face so wide it must have hurt. He gathered us together in the main auditorium and announced that he had just confirmed the scheduling of a one-year starship expedition, to occur in twenty-six months. We had barely enough time to prepare.

As soon as the announcement was made, I slipped away to inform Jamil. He smiled quietly as I told him the news.

“Sir,” I asked cautiously, “if some of us have an opportunity to fly on the starship, would that interfere with our work for Shia Ali?”

His expression grew serious. “That will not interfere with our plans. Now listen carefully ... it would not be wise to speculate about your real mission for now. Don’t do it, and don’t encourage your teammates to do it. For now, be satisfied that you are all doing extremely well, and that everything is on track.”

“So we continue as we have been?”

“Absolutely. Do your jobs the best way you know how, and become invaluable to their efforts. The rest will come in time, God willing.”

I returned to the dormitory at the observatory brimming with excitement, and found virtually everyone feeling the same, even Zeid.

He, Faysal, and I got together in my quarters that evening for dinner, and there was no way I could keep the conversation from turning to the topic on our minds.

“What did Al-Hariri have to say?” Faysal asked.

“That we are to carry on as we have been,” I replied. “We’re doing good work, and our plans are on track.”

“Nothing about our real mission?” Zeid asked.

“That will come in time.”

“I’ll tell you what our mission is,” Faysal blurted. “We take the starship.”

That had occurred to me, but the likelihood of getting enough of a team on board seemed remote.

Zeid’s eyes grew wide. “Why?” he asked with alarm.

“Power,” Faysal replied. “Power and prestige.”

“Enough careless speculation,” I cautioned. “The odds are too long. What would we do with a starship, anyway?”

“What would we do with nukes?” Faysal replied, a gleam in his eye.

“Good question,” Zeid challenged, eyeing Faysal suspiciously.

“What would we do with nuclear weapons? What are you telling us?”

“Oh, just that while you and Shahid were off turning airliners into scrap metal, I was in Pakistan requisitioning a few, shall we say, persuaders.”

My jaw dropped. Zeid just rolled his eyes. So now the Shia Ali was a full-fledged world power! I didn’t wonder that it was a well-kept secret, but I wondered what threat would ever make us use such a weapon. Nuclear weapons had always served best as a deterrent, and a deterrent was always welcome in a world as hostile as the one we faced. Of course, to be a deterrent, the other side has to know you have them

Zeid dropped his head into his hands. “And now a starship.”

“And now a starship,” Faysal confirmed, smiling smugly.

Each of us knew what awesome, even world-shattering, power that entailed. Certainly, such a weapon would give our enemies cause to fear and respect us. The fact that the infidels thought we might actually be mad enough to use it would play in our favor.

Zeid breathed a sigh, I assumed it was of relief, and shrugged.

“Oh, well, I guess I can live with that.”

Security

The Dreamer was underway. The thrust provided normal gravity, which was healthy, but tiring. Jan clambered down the ladderway and made her way to the virtual reality chamber. Erica Thompson was waiting inside, holding the little computer which she was almost never without. An image of the main radiation lock loomed in front of them, and the cavernous cargo bay surrounded them.

“Okay, Jan, here’s the scenario,” Erica began. “You’ve been fired. I got in one of my cantankerous moods and canned your superfluous butt for no apparent reason. You hate my guts. You decide to get even. How would you do it?”

“Me?” Jan looked at the old lady quizzically. “If I were after you, I’d just write a kiss-and-tell book and get rich. I thought this was about ship security.”

“Alright, alright, new scenario,” Erica retorted, handing the computer to Jan. “You hate my guts and you belong to a mysterious sect of devil-worshippers who figure the odds are better if they end the world now than if they wait for God to do it. You want to take the ship and ram Earth, just like all the horror movies. Reduce it to a quivering ball of magma, and cause such a traffic jam at the Pearly Gate, that most of ‘em decide to go to hell where the devil is offering free housing with heat and hot water.”

“Oh, well, in that case, I think the first thing I’d do is monkey with the air supply,” Jan said, moving the view to the main reprocessor. “It’s the most vulnerable part of the ship that can take out the crew quickly without doing any damage to the ship itself.

There must be a dozen ways I could bugger it. I could dump it, stop circulation, drop oxygen content, raise carbon dioxide levels, introduce a poison gas, or ...” she moved back to the rear of the unit, “... convince the fire safety array that there’s a major flash fire on all decks, and suffocate everyone.”

“Good,” Erica replied, nodding. “Pretty much the same answers I came up with. Then what happens?”

“I’d need some help,” Jan said, changing to a section view and highlighting the

bridge and engineering. “Couple of gunsels on the bridge with me, three more in engineering, at least. Those sections will seal off and go on their own air supplies as soon as the security system triggers. Maybe a couple more bad-guys in gas-masks roaming the corridors to keep the peace.”

“OK,” Erica said, “so how do you convince the crew to ram the planet?”

“I’m just a really mean sumbitch,” Jan countered, “plus I put extract of neutered pussycat into the coffee, which makes everyone extra special scared and cooperative. Actually made the coffee taste better, so they drank lots of it.”

“Mmmm, creative move, that,” Erica admitted, taking the computer back and pressing a code into the keyboard. There was a muffled whump, and the image shook slightly. “But just a little too late. New trick we’re considering installing. Before the drug takes full effect, someone in engineering summons up enough testosterone to punch in a code that sets off a charge in the main fuel control assemblies. The c-prime system is dead as a doornail, and can’t be repaired without returning to Earth. Which, of course, we can’t do without a c-prime engine. Whatcha gonna do now, Miss Smarty Pants?”

Jan took the computer and moved the view back to the engines.

Erica was right, the damage was beyond repair. “Ooh, that makes me mad. Guess I’ll just have to kill everyone.”

“Hmm, guess I’ve changed my mind. You’re hired again. Here’s the scoop: we’ve been taken over by armed hijackers who’ve taken the bridge and engineering. We’ve blown the engines to protect Earth, and now they’re really mad. You’re so grateful to have your job back, you decide to save my wrinkled ass. How are you going to do it?”

“Well,” Jan hesitated, considering for a minute, “I’m part of a crack security team with nerves of steel, primarily because we don’t drink coffee. Also don’t drink the same water, breathe the same air, or eat the same food as everyone else. That last one is an old airline safety regulation to keep the crew from all croaking simultaneously from eating the same bad in-flight meal.”

“Interesting precaution,” Erica noted. “Next you ...?”

“If this were one of your old movies, the next step would probably involve

crawling through an improbably large air duct, but I'd have to lose a lot of weight to get through these, and they're sealed off anyway." Jan paused, stuck for a moment, then an idea started to form and a smile spread across her face. She brought up a diagram.

"But I think I do know a couple of old conduits from those old electronic consoles we upgraded to photonics a couple of years back, and I could pump a little gas of my own into the bridge and engineering. Knock everyone out, cut through the hatches, and take the bad guys."

Erica wasn't impressed. "Raj came up with the same idea. I'm not so sure I like it. Too slow. They'd probably have time to shoot me first. Might be the best we can do, though. Keep working on it, and let me know if you think of something."

Jan turned to leave, but Erica tugged on her sleeve. Jan saw that the old woman looked suddenly serious and sad.

"Jan, level with me. Are we doing enough? Are we being paranoid? Hell, I invented this contraption. Maybe I'm too close to it to see it clearly."

Jan considered her reply for a minute, then spoke slowly and gently. "This ship is a big responsibility. We all know that. We take it seriously. We've got plenty of ways to be sure c-prime capability doesn't fall into the wrong hands, and we're ready to carry them out, whatever the consequences. Don't worry. Earth is safe. On the other hand, some bunch of idiots is bound to try to take a starship one day.

It could just be the end of the world for us, if we're not very careful.

From the Confessions:

Of the original agglomeration of astrophysicists Kammholtz had gathered, about a third (including my five comrades and myself) had expertise and physical qualifications which made them candidates for the mission. Only twelve could actually go. Over the next two years, the most extraordinary set of "coincidences" pared down the candidates. First, there were two major drug-smuggling scandals which tainted the reputations of a great many qualified candidates. A strain of antibiotic-resistant tuberculosis infected a dozen others. One group was seated around a conference table telling ethnic jokes at

Kammholtz's expense, unaware that a malfunction in the telephone was broadcasting their rude comments over the public address system.

Another fifteen failed security screening for undisclosed reasons. At the last minute, six of the few remaining candidates dropped out due to family emergencies or unspecified personal reasons.

By the time the flight team was selected, there were barely enough qualified candidates to select from. All six of us made the cut.

Zeid was very nearly his old self again. It looked as if we would once again share an epic adventure, this time to the stars. While it was now almost a forgone conclusion among the team members that our job would be to take the ship, Jamil had not yet informed us of this. The possibility didn't seem to bother Zeid particularly, and I gathered that such a symbolic act was something his conscience could deal with.

Finally, the day came when Jamil took me into his full confidence and presented me with my orders to assume the role of strike team leader for the capture of The Starry-Eyed Dreamer. I was to inform only Faysal, my second-in-command. Together, we were to study the security of the ship and determine how to integrate the specially prepared weapons we would need into our instruments.

The weapons included small, high-impulse, explosive projectiles which could be fired from almost anything with a tube of the right diameter, and a short-range but effective particle beam device that was externally identical to the accelerator of our spectrometer. (The accelerator was a calibration standard for the peaks we were interested in, and, though I didn't design it, it must have attracted the interest of my superiors.) The little rockets were our precision weapons for use against individuals, while the accelerators would serve, like sawed-off shotguns, to handle groups. In addition, we would carry apparatus and reagents to manufacture assorted gasses and explosives from innocent onboard materials.

The carefully detailed plans we were given spelled out our goals.

We were to gain control, coerce a minimum contingent of the crew to run the ship, and eliminate the rest. We should be prepared for a long stay in space, far enough out to make us impossible to detect, but close enough to receive timely microwave instructions. A position well out in the Oort cloud was specified.

Less than a week later, the Mahdi broadcast one of his cryptic parables that most of the world ignores. Even if you heard it translated, no doubt you would have missed its meaning. Its meaning was clear to his followers, though. He said the Day of Reckoning was close at hand, and that the Earth would soon be consumed in fire, as God had promised Noah. He called on his small core of faithful followers to gather reminders from the holy shrines, assemble their belongings, and gather aboard three massive fusion freighters bought with what little wealth the Shah had not stolen from us when he regained the throne. In space, they would await the availability of a new world, which would be revealed to us.

Just which world he had in mind was a mystery. Of the few new worlds accessible by Gate, none would pass for Eden, although a couple might have passed as an upper level of Hell. The best of those was, ironically, probably Mazra'ih, the planet first settled by Baha'is we had driven from Iran.

The following day there came an announcement that stunned the world of Islam. The Holy Ka'ba in Mecca had been attacked by a suicide squad. For most of the day they held the Saudi security forces at bay while they accomplished their mission. With a tiny charge that rent the Muslim world and which will reverberate for all time to come, they blasted the Black Stone, the sacred rock set by Abraham, designated by Muhammad as the focus of our prayers, and the object of pilgrimage for every able-bodied believer. Before they died in the final assault, the attackers launched a fragment of the holy relic out of the shrine by a small guided rocket. It disappeared into the desert, and could not be traced.

I was stunned at the atrocity. Which of our enemies could have done such a thing? The Zionists? The Baha'is? The western powers?

The Saudis themselves? The act reinforced my willingness to strike for our cause.

I sought Zeid's company, needing his faith. I found him in prayer, and in tears. I thought I understood. I did not. He stood up and struck me with all of his strength, bloodying my mouth and sending me crashing into a wall.

"May the hands of the father of flame perish! May he himself perish. Nothing shall his wealth and gains avail him. He shall be burnt in a flaming fire ..."

I picked myself up. "What ... are you ranting about?"

“Didn’t you hear?”

“About the Ka’ba? Yes. That’s why I came.”

“You don’t know who is behind it?”

“No.”

“The Mahdi, you fool. Didn’t you hear him? ‘Gather reminders,’
he said.”

“Zeid, calm down. It must have been enemies of the Faith.”

“Oh, that is plain enough.”

He broke down in a torrent of tears, and sat on the edge of his bed. I sat across from him, dabbing the blood from my lip.

Finally he looked up. “You still don’t see, do you, Shahid? The parable about world being consumed in fire?”

I shrugged. “That’s what holy men do. They tell us how near judgement day is. It’s their job.”

He shook his head. “That’s what other holy men do. Talk. Not this one. You’re going to give him the tool to do it.”

“You’re crazy. What would be the point?”

“He is crazy. That’s the point. Don’t you see, the desecration of the Mosque ... the old one won’t be around much longer. They’ll need to build another on the new planet.”

Zeid stood up, picking up his well-worn copy of the Koran from his nightstand. “I can’t be part of this.”

He walked out.

I followed, pleading in whispers, trying to get him to listen to reason. He wouldn’t respond. He walked down to the bus stop, ran down the crowded bus

just leaving for San Fernando, and boarded without even a look back.

A little bell sounded in my head. I was furious. This person I had looked after all my life, whose life I had saved more than once, was threatening to destroy the mission, my career, the cause, and everything it stood for! I ran down the street to Jamil's apartment, and told him the basics. "Zeid just cracked. He's leaving."

"I was afraid of this," he replied with a scowl. "You said he was fine."

"He was, until this thing at the Ka'ba," I replied defensively.

"He must be stopped, quickly. Have Faysal do it."

"No. He's my responsibility. I'll do it." I thought for a second.

"It will look like an accident, but I must act now. I need a gun and your motorcycle."

I raced after the slow-moving bus with my blood boiling as it hadn't in years. All my conditioning kicked in. I wasn't after my lifelong friend, I was after the enemy, worse, a traitor.

I caught the bus in plenty of time for my plan, and slowed up behind it. I had ridden this route many times. I knew the driver's habits, and I knew the road. He drove too fast, and loved to cut off vehicles trying to pass. Especially motorcycles. The mountain road was an obstacle course of switchbacks and cliffs, potholed and without safety barricades. The bus was in poor condition, and top-heavy, with half a dozen last-minute passengers clinging to the roof.

As we approached a sharp turn at the head of a 150 meter cliff, I made my move, pulling out as if to pass. The driver obliged by swerving into me and speeding up. I feigned another attempt, just as he entered the curve, this time with Jamil's big forty-five automatic, loaded with exploding bullets, in my left hand. He swerved again, the bus tipping precariously. I fired. The overloaded high pressure tires exploded, and the bus toppled over the cliff.

Two of the passengers from the roof jumped clear. They picked themselves up, and began running from me. I twisted the throttle, dumped the clutch, and pulled the front wheel into the air. I hit the first squarely in the back, killing him instantly. The other stopped and stared in disbelief. I ran him down.

I dragged him back to the point where the bus had disappeared over the cliff. He was still moaning, still conscious, when I picked him up and threw him over. I disposed of his dead countryman similarly, and rode home to clean up.

I never even looked back at the crash scene. I had no doubt that the crash was entirely effective. The fall, fifty stories onto a rocky talus slide, would be fatal for all, and the investigation would be an open and shut case. This spot had killed before, and such tragedy was an accepted part of life for these miserable infidels.

The Inner Sanctum

Erica found Jan in the mess, noshing on a bagel.

“I think I’ve got the perfect place for the security station, Jan.

Stow that thing and follow me.”

Jan stuffed the remainder of the bagel into her mouth. She looked like a hamster, but at least she wouldn’t be accused of spreading crumbs through the ship. She followed the research director, barely keeping pace with the old woman’s expert gymnastics.

Erica sailed through the ship with an easy grace that made even an experienced hand like Jan look clumsy.

They arrived at Erica’s suite. The doors swished open and Erica darted into the office. Jan hesitated.

“Well, come on!”

“Mumff!” Jan’s eyebrows arched in surprise as she gagged on the dry bread, but she pushed off and floated in. “Sorry. I haven’t been in here since my interview. I thought you just needed to pick something up.”

“This way,” Erica motioned toward an inner door similar to the outer. It swished apart, revealing her lab.

Jan was wide-eyed as she entered. The room was cluttered with various pieces of apparatus and memorabilia. Jan could recognize about a third of it. “Wow, I’d

only just imagined what was in here.”

“Just an old lady’s junk,” Erica sighed. “Twenty projects I don’t have time for. Got my hands full with one.” She pointed to a tangle of cables and modules attached to a small cylinder braced to the walls, ceiling, and floor with massive framework. Evidently the thing had a lot of mass. From its mirrored finish, Jan guessed it was shielded with trineutronium. A bumper sticker on it lamented “Beam me up, Scotty, there’s no intelligent life here.”

“What’s that?” Jan asked timidly.

“Nosy, aren’t we?” Erica growled. “Well, if you’re going to be working out of here, I guess you should know, but it’s a secret, understand?”

Jan nodded.

“It’s a transporter.”

Jan’s expression left no doubt she was delighted. She glided over to look at the device more carefully. “A matter-energy scrambler?”

“Oh, heavens no!” Erica rubbed her chin. “Let’s see, a person weighs maybe five times as much as the special nuclear material in a nuclear weapon, which converts less than, say, one thousandth of its mass to energy. Yeah, I’d say ‘scrambler’ is a good name for a device that converts a person into the energy equivalent of a global nuclear war. This is just a miniature version of a Gate transmitter, with a phased wave feature that substitutes for the singularity normally needed in the receiver. Nothing fancy, just plain old quantum displacement teleportation.”

“Just one way, it can’t beam anything up?” Jan looked disappointed.

Erica shrugged. “What can I say? It’s got limitations. Not the least of which is short range.”

“Hmmm.” Janet studied the device. “Could it solve some of our security problems? Get help to our hypothetical crew on the bridge?”

“No, not yet anyway,” Erica replied. “Can’t transport through solid walls, and I don’t even know how much atmosphere it can penetrate. But enough piddling

with this toy. Roll up your sleeves.

We've got work to do."

Erica opened a conventional hatch, revealing a storage room filled with the most compact and diverse collection of old junk Jan had ever seen on a starship. One piece drifted slowly out in the draft created by swinging the hatch open. Jan giggled.

"Tain't funny, McGee," Erica grumbled. "Oh, damn, now you must really think I'm old."

Jan's quizzical expression said she hadn't the foggiest idea what the old physicist was talking about.

Erica looked toward the ceiling. "Now I really think I'm old.

That's radio comedy even older than me, Jan. Anyway, there's eighteen years of clutter in here. I've been needing to go through this mess and get rid of ninety percent of it. Figure I'll box it up and ship it out to museums. They'll probably think they're getting priceless treasures, and I might be able to wrangle a tax deduction out of it.

Meantime, you'll get a security station away from the prying eyes of visitors."

Jan stuck her head into the room cautiously, considering the scope of the task before them.

"Yeah, I know," Erica commented, smiling, "but if you can make it through this Augean mess, we'll assign you a team to help you out.

That would make you security supervisor of the Dreamer. Means longer hours and more responsibility, but don't worry, we won't mess up your tax situation with more pay. No, no, don't thank me, it's the least I could do."

From the Confessions:

There were less than two months until the flight, which you might think would be a busy time. In fact, the workload had lightened considerably. The instrument packages were already integrated into payload modules, and the weapons, or

rather their unrecognizable components, were built into them or stored as spare parts.

Technicians would install the modules and make the final adjustments. The engineers and scientists had done their part. Those of us on the flight team were granted a month of leave in preparation for our long journey.

We each put on a great pious act, expressing our grief both at the tragic loss of Zeid, and at the unthinkable blow to a symbol of our Faith. Nobody questioned us when we boarded a jet to Mecca, to make a pilgrimage to our spiritual roots before setting off to the stars.

Somehow we ended up in the mountains of Afghanistan instead, at the headquarters-in-exile of the Shia Ali.

We were greeted as heroes, and treated like royalty. Jamil introduced me to the Powers that Be, bragging about my quick thinking, courage, and loyalty. He skillfully kept my attention away from the bulging carpet under which my collected crimes and doubts were fermenting furiously.

We trained hard in those few weeks. The organization had built the best mock-up I had ever seen, duplicating every important aspect of the ship, down to the location of individual instruments. The only detail we did not have was zero gravity, which would be in effect at the time of the attack.

When we had honed our attack to near-perfection, we had a mysterious visitor, an old man in cleric's robes, hidden in the shadows. We never saw his face, but each of us knew it was the Mahdi. You have been frustrated in your attempts to connect him directly with the Shia Ali ... so have we. It has always been a disappointment that he did not support us publicly, even though we knew where the orders came from. But that night, he was there. We ran through our drill perfectly, and he nodded approval and left.

I focused on the mission with an intensity I have never known before. It was all that mattered to me. Success would bring me all the adulation I had ever wanted. It would make up for all the years of hard work, the sacrifices, the kowtowing to infidels, the betrayal by friends.

The last few days of our stay were spent packing the headquarters for the evacuation to space. I was the only one trusted to move the contents of Jamil's

office. Most of the bulky books were being discarded, replaced with more efficient crystals, but certain key books were being taken, and I was not surprised to see which ones. I was able to set aside the leather-bound book that had caught my attention years earlier, so that I could read through it before it was noticed missing.

The book turned out to be several in one. The first was a guide to psychology, which I simply skimmed through. It outlined training tactics, with which I was intimately familiar, and the reasoning behind them. The study I had read earlier was correct: the primary focus of our training was to instill in us the feeling that our victims were subhuman.

Easy enough to instill. They were subhuman.

Rip.

The second was a treatise on the political strategy of our organization. The tactics were complex, but an underlying theme ran consistently through it: the radical nature of the organization tended to make it small and weak. By instilling hatred against the Muslim community as a whole, they would be driven into our folds by our enemies.

Rip. Pop.

The third section, at first glance, looked like the Koran. It was a copy of a handwritten text, in the fine script of a religious scholar.

The author claimed to be the Mahdi, the Twelfth Imam, returned from centuries of occultation to show us a new Path. The work was in Arabic, and the idiomatic verses had a vague similarity to the Koran.

But the Koran, in the original Arabic, has a transcendental beauty beyond man's power to mimic. The verses of this new text were dark and chilling, all about Gehenna and eternal damnation, of Satan and the fate of unbelievers. It said that against such overwhelming evil as existed in the world today, all tactics were valid. The message was simple and straightforward: all but the true believers must die.

And every sura began "In the name of God, the Vengeful and All-Powerful."

For just an instant, I realized that I was among monsters, and that I had become one of them.

The dam burst. The collection of vile poisons festering beneath that bulging carpet poured out, mingling with the new. I could not think, quite literally. What sort of mind can look upon well over three hundred innocent victims, a lifetime of denial of plain facts, a set of values so totally at odds with what noble goals that mind claims to embrace, and simply admit to being so wrong? It is hard enough to admit to breaking a window!

My solution? I took a deep breath, purged the poisons from my system, and embraced the text I now held in my hands as the latest Truth from God.

I was the Angel of Death, the hardened and unremorseful instrument of final destruction. It was an important job, and I was proud to do it.

Guess Who's Coming To Deneb

Commander Rajpal opened the hatch of his ready-room to admit Jan and Hussein. He held up a pad. "I need you two to look over the passenger manifest for our next mission. Particularly you, Hussein.

If I recall, you're from Iran?"

Hussein nodded. "I was just a kid when we left, though."

Raj shrugged. "I've never been. Or Jan, I suspect. I'm hoping you can offer a little cultural background. We've got a statistical improbability here. Of a dozen people in this next team, five are Iranian. They all passed muster with security, but with all the trouble in that part of the world, this just naturally makes me nervous. Should I be?" He handed the tablet to Hussein.

The young man studied the information for a while. "These guys are all educated and have lived abroad for years. The thing you have to realize is that most Iranians are decent people, and the ones you meet around the world are mostly refugees from one Islamic Revolution or another. The best and the brightest were targeted for persecution, and the lucky ones got away. That's how my family left."

"I realize that," the commander said with a nod. "But they're still spread pretty

thinly outside of Iran. What do you make of five of twelve being from Iran?”

“Muslims were doing astronomy when Europe was in the Dark Ages. Look at all those Arabic star names! And before that, there were the Magi, the guys Christians know as the ‘wise men’. I don’t find it all that amazing that Persians would become astronomers, or enter a related field.” Hussein paused to consider. “But it is a bit odd, almost half of the team.”

Jan took the tablet and looked it over. “Look at these dates.

Three of these guys have only lived abroad since the last big broo-ha-hah, when the Second Islamic Revolution was overthrown.”

“I noticed that too,” Raj commented. “Is there any chance these guys are part of some sort of sleeper cell?”

Hussein looked at the dates. “Anything is possible. But a lot of people were pretty much trapped there while that fake Mahdi guy was running things. When the new government was formed, people were free to come and go again.”

Raj considered this a while. “Clue me in. Just what did people there think of that nut-job?”

“I was too young to understand much first-hand, but my mom and dad had plenty to say about it, and so did our friends who made it out.” Hussein took a deep breath. “Where to start? I guess you’ve picked up from the media that the Mahdi is a figure from Islam, and the Shias have a very specific belief about who he is. We’re the followers of Ali, Mohammad’s son-in-law. After him came a succession of Teachers, the Imams.”

Jan nodded. “This guy claims to be some reincarnation of number twelve?”

Hussein shrugged. “Something like that. The Twelfth Imam vanished. The belief is that God put him into occultation ... I guess you could say God made him invisible, maybe in science fiction terms he “phased” him into a sort of hidden existence, among us, but unseen. One day he will return. ‘He will then make the earth abound with peace and justice as it will have been fraught with injustice and tyranny before him.’”

“A little like the Second Coming of Christ?” Jan asked. “I hope that’s not

offensive.”

Hussein laughed. “Closer than you think. Contrary to what you might have heard, Muslims don’t dislike Jesus. Fine fellow. No more related to God than any of us, and we don’t call him Christ, but we like him just fine. And he’s supposed to reappear at around the same time and help the Mahdi re-establish peace, love, brotherhood, and all that. But here’s the kicker. There is no way, none whatsoever, that the man who has been calling himself Mahdi is the actual Twelfth Imam, because there’s no peace, love, brotherhood, justice, or anything good happening when he’s around. The stuff he preaches is positively at odds with Islam. Basically he’s just a defrocked and demented old Ayatolla who likes proclaiming that people should be killed for any number of made-up reasons.”

“Well, well, Mr. Daryadel,” Raj chided, “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you say a demeaning word about anyone. You’re usually polite to a fault. Evidently this conversation has touched a nerve,” Raj noted. “He had a pretty big following once?”

Hussein nodded. “When he first proclaimed himself to be Mahdi, a lot of people got excited, hoping it was so. But I understand his following is now down to a few thousand. And if the recent speculation is right and he’s behind the desecration of the Ka’ba, I’d guess his following will soon be zero. You simply cannot imagine just how angry the whole Muslim world is over that.”

Jan thought for a minute. “Is he nuts enough to try to hijack a starship and destroy Earth?”

Hussein hesitated only a heartbeat. “Probably.”

“That terrorist organization of his, the Shia Ali, are they competent enough to pull it off?”

Hussein’s face darkened to a scowl. “Those loathsome bastards ... they have no right to use that name!” He sighed. “There I go again. I guess I’ve picked up bad habits from the crew, saying what I really feel. There probably are not that many of them, but those few are really bad news. They think they’re pretty clever. They’ve managed to sneak into a number of countries and kill Iranian exiles who were speaking out against them. They probably do have sleeper cells. I’m told some of them are pretty skilled. But my experience with them is limited to when I was a kid in Iran. What I remember is their hatred. I wonder if they could ever

learn to mask it?”

“Profiling is illegal,” Jan stated. “But I would sure like someone on my team that has met these guys before. I hope I’m just being paranoid. I hope this new team of visitors is just ordinary decent folks. Maybe you can ease my mind on that?”

Hussein turned to Jan. “If you’re asking me if I want to give up my regular duties to lock myself up in that closet of yours on the off chance these guys are terrorists, the answer is no. Not based on what I see here. But I’ll certainly check them out when they come on board, and tell you what I think. If they scare me, I’m at your service.”

“That’s all we can ask,” Raj agreed.

The Confrontation

Dr. Kammholtz and his team had not been on board for a day when Hussein asked to meet Jan and Commander Rajpal. “When I was a kid, we lived in a nice neighborhood where a lot of our neighbors were either professionals, or worked for the government.

Dad was both. I remember a bunch of guys who made Dad nervous, who came around a lot asking questions and saying mean stuff. One night, they hauled off our next-door neighbor. A day later, his wife got a bill from the court for the bullets they used to kill him. That night, we all got in the car and lit out for the border on back roads.

“I swear, the five guys you’re worried about ... they give me the same feeling. Something in their eyes. They hate me. They’re a little aloof with everyone else, but they look at me like I’m a traitor or something.”

Raj looked at Jan. “Your take on this?”

Jan looked nervously at Hussein. “I’ve checked over their stuff, and you know it was all run under a microscope before it got to us.

Nothing looks wrong. The sniffers don’t detect anything sinister. But one of them was watching me as I checked it over, and I swear he was smirking, like I was looking straight at a weapon and didn’t recognize it. And I’d bet I could piece something dangerous together with half the stuff on this ship, if I really

wanted to.”

Raj looked troubled. “That’s not evidence. We’ve got no basis for having them pulled from the mission roster.”

Hussein looked almost panicked. “You don’t believe us?” Raj shook his head. “I didn’t say that. Trust your instincts. But unless you can find weapons in their luggage, or Interpol matches them up with known terrorists, I know what our orders will be. ‘Stop picking on people because of their national origin.’ But I want these guys watched full-time.”

“I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep anyway,” Hussein confessed.

“I might as well join Jan’s team for this mission.”

“Done,” Raj agreed.

The visiting team was placed under surveillance, and the crew made no secret of it. Commander Rajpal also placed restrictions on them, not allowing them simultaneous access to the bridge and engineering decks, and restricting the number of visitors allowed in either area.

Kammholtz, a humorless soul to begin with, did not find the situation amusing. The restrictions on simultaneous access to the bridge and engineering interfered with his operations, and his schedule was slipping. They were scheduled to visit five stars, taking close readings to compare to measurements made from Earth. They would also observe more distant stars, again looking for differences from Solar observations. The readings would be used to correct for attenuation by interstellar dust and gas, factors which astronomers and cosmologists were vitally interested in. Two stars into the mission, he called a meeting with Erica and Raj.

“You two intolerable paranoids are interfering with my mission.

I won’t put up with it!”

“Oh?” Erica snapped back, “figure to walk home, do you?”

“I bring to your attention Article I, Section C, Paragraph 5.1 of the ‘Regulations For Research Vessels,’” Kammholtz stated with as much authority as he could.

He waved a booklet in the air. “It plainly says that any form of racial or ethnic discrimination will be grounds for dismissal.”

“Gimme that thing,” Erica growled, snatching the document from his hands. “Seems to me there’s a paragraph or two about security in there, too.” She leafed through the pamphlet. “In fact, seems to me I heard a regulation somewhere about stupidity being a capital offense.”

Raj signaled Erica to cool it. “Doctor, I’m in a bit of a bind here.

While I have to agree with you on this matter of discrimination, I have to be conscious of the danger of losing control of a starship. A couple of years ago, we were cited for some security deficiencies which led to these restrictions. The rights of a few researchers to be present in a particular part of the ship, or even the degree of success of a long-awaited mission, must take a back seat to the survival of sixteen billion human beings.”

Kammholtz grabbed the regulation from Dr. Thompson. “Arrrrg, I’m stuck fifty-two light years from home with idiots. I’ve worked with these people for over two years. Before that, they all worked for well-respected research organizations. They are all dedicated, hard-working professionals, and they deserve to be treated as such. I suppose you think some mysterious terrorist organization educated them, placed them in just the right jobs, hypnotized me into recruiting them, and hid grenade launchers in their toothbrushes?”

Erica nodded. “The idea had occurred to us. Tell me, Doctor, don’t you think it looks just a little suspicious that they make up almost half of your team?”

Kammholtz snorted. “The only reason there are so many of them on my team is that they’re more morally decent than average. Most of the other candidates couldn’t keep their noses clean.”

“Well, they may be moral,” Erica replied, “but they sure as hell are hostile.”

“Listen to yourself, Dr. Thompson!” Kammholtz exclaimed.

“You and your crew swear against God constantly. You say ‘hell’ this and ‘damn’ that. Why wouldn’t someone with a religious heritage find you offensive? They may be somewhat aloof, but I wouldn’t characterize them as hostile.”

Erica reflexively prepared a profane answer, but caught herself in time. Without her favorite linguistic crutch, she found herself tongue-tied.

Dr. Kammholtz took advantage of the silence. “Doctor, you have two Nobel prizes. That’s pretty unusual. You’re supposed to be smart. THINK! If you were a terrorist, what would your goal be?”

“To cleanse the Earth of foul-mouthed old ladies,” she sighed.

“No,” Kammholtz replied, suddenly calming down as if he were just about to play his ace. “Your goal would be to foster hatred and suspicion against your own people. Your goal would be to cause the other side to treat your people exactly as you are treating these five good, peaceful scientists. Don’t you see, by acting this way, you strengthen the terrorists. That may not be how you see it, but it is how UNASA sees it. Dr. Thompson, if you really want to remain on this ship, I suggest you listen to me.”

Raj motioned Erica into an adjoining cabin.

“He’s right, you know.”

“Yeah, I know,” Erica admitted. “God, I hate it when self-important assholes are right.”

“Um, Erica, about this attitude ...”

“I know, I know. I’m being impolitic. Look, I’m a crotchety old lady. See the wrinkles? Earned every one of them.”

“So much for plan D,” Raj sighed. “So what was plan E again?”

“I guess, if we have to allow access to the bridge and engineering simultaneously, we’ll just have to fall back on Jan’s idea. She wants to put an EVA-suited team on standby in the security station. They’ll be ready for any air emergency, on alternate rations to avoid poisoning, and ready to launch a rescue if anything happens.”

“Wow, whole shifts locked in a closet wearing a spacesuit. Poor kids, I hate to put them through that,” Raj observed, “but it sounds like a good idea. What’s that line I’m supposed to use? So let it be written, so let it be done?”

Erica winced. “Close enough. She also thinks it would take at least two terrorists in each location to gain control. Think we can get Kammholtz to agree to just one in engineering?”

“I’ll see what he says.”

The Rending

The terrorists made their move after the Dreamer had established orbit at the fourth star, eight months into the mission. The crew’s original edginess had worn down noticeably, and the time was finally ripe.

Shahid Kahlid and two of his accomplices, Cyrus and Gaffar, were on the bridge. Shahid was at his instrument console while the other two were floating in an imaging access area in the ceiling, repairing the spectrometer. Seems the accelerator was giving them some trouble. They had replaced it just a few days earlier, and were now doing it again. The old and new accelerators floated at their sides.

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The one named Hamid was in engineering, operating a free-space mass spectrometer, a large and power-hungry device situated in the cargo bay. He eyed the chief engineer, glanced at the time on his terminal, and readied a finger over a particular key on his keyboard.

Faysal drifted innocently through the floor hatch down to the engineering deck carrying a third accelerator which, no doubt, needed some repairs. He glanced at his watch. If the engineers stuck to their usual routine, one would shortly emerge to perform an inspection elsewhere on the ship. He assumed a crouched position on the wall opposite the engineering hatch.

Punctual as usual, Aaron emerged from the hatch. Faysal sprang past the man for the portal, trying to get through it before it could close. Aaron was startled by the act, but managed to bring a knee into Faysal’s chest, spoiling his trajectory and winding him. Faysal recoiled off the ceiling, brought his weapon to bear on Aaron, and blasted him with a burst of blue plasma. Faysal had never fired the weapon in microgravity, and badly underestimated the recoil, which sent him tumbling.

The hatch was half closed by the time Faysal regained enough control to push off towards it. By that time, the engineering crew was fully alert, and had triggered the security alarm. Faysal was halfway through the hatch when the explosive charges of the emergency door went off. The heavy sliding security door slammed shut, cutting the hijacker in two.

Inside engineering, Annette executed a temporary engine suppression while the three male engineers sprang to attack Hamid, who had pieced together a rocket launcher from components in his toolkit. Hamid dispatched Oury and Ron before they could reach him, but could not turn in time to defend himself from Iheany, who was armed with a screwdriver. Iheany impaled Hamid through the heart, then turned to say something to Annette. Blood spurting from his chest and back, Hamid pointed his weapon at Iheany and squeezed the trigger, then passed out.

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Shahid slipped his feet into hold-downs in preparation for action.

On Hamid's signal, Shahid initiated the attack on the bridge. Cyrus opened fire on a group of four crewmembers with his accelerator, killing two and severely burning two others. Gaffar and Shahid trained their weapons on the rest of the crew. One at a time, the attackers donned breathing masks, hung ready around their necks in case they detected any sleep agents or other tampering with their air supply. When he was sure he had everyone's attention and cooperation, Shahid motioned for Gaffar to disable the security cameras.

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As the attacks began, cylinders of reagents modified by the hijackers began to vent into the air in the remainder of the ship. The gas was a potent sleep agent, rather than a lethal mix, because the terrorists wanted a reserve of "volunteers" in case the first batch proved reluctant. In fact, knowing there was a reserve of hostages who might be willing to cooperate would tend to discourage suicidal stubbornness.

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In a tiny cabin in Erica Thompson's lab suite, a startled security team dropped their visors and flew to their drill. Each grabbed an oxygen pack, shrugged it on, and attached it to their suit. Jan initiated a security scan from her terminal,

confirmed that the gas was non-lethal and that the air reprocessor could eventually eliminate it, and switched the intercom monitor to ALL mode. Mike removed the anesthetic gas cylinders and related fittings from the emergency equipment pack as Hussein unlocked the firearms locker.

Jan glanced at the cylinders. "I think that's not going to work.

Just before they killed the cameras, they got out some kind of masks and put them on. They're a step ahead of us. There's got to be a better way. I'm sending the signal for them to hang tight."

"They outnumber the hijackers," Hussein noted. "Shouldn't we signal them to rush them?"

Jan shook her head. "Negative. Did you see the way those lightning-bolt things work? They would probably kill half of our people before they were taken. Come on, maybe there's something in that collection of stuff Dr. Thompson hoards that can at least give us some ideas."

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The ringleader of the hijackers shouted commands to his compatriots in Persian. Gaffar threw a switch on a console to open a voice channel to engineering. Shahid called for Faysal, but got no response.

"Give it up," Commander Rajpal said quietly. He tried not to look at the subtle clues appearing on various screens. The security detail was alive and well, working on a solution. "You haven't got a chance."

"You!" Shahid shouted back to him, "shut up until you are ordered to do otherwise. The rest of you, move over against that console." He directed them to the collection of instruments with which his team studied the stars, absolutely sure it was not vital, and held no capability which would endanger his mission. "It can stand a few holes if needed."

They complied, slowly and carefully.

"You! Cabin boy," Shahid shouted to the commander. "Raise engineering."

Raj hooked the console as he floated by and punched the station code.

“Engineering, this is the bridge. Oury, what’s the status down there?”

There was silence for a minute, then Annette’s voice replied.

“Oury’s dead, Commander. Two of those bastards tried to take engineering. We stopped them, but Oury, Iheany, and Ron are dead.

Maybe Aaron, too.” Then her voice cracked. “Oh, God, it’s a mess down here.”

Shahid motioned the commander away from the intercom. He considered the situation for a moment, obviously displeased that half of his plan had misfired. Then a nasty grin spread across his face as he formulated a solution. He punched up engineering on a video console, and set the intercom to full duplex. He verified that the girl was alone, and saw that she was distraught.

“Listen, you little whore, you take your orders from me now,”

Shahid growled. “You will re-enable the c-prime systems immediately. If you do not, you will be killing your friends. You will kill one of them every ten minutes until you do. Every one that dies will be because of you.”

The angry and accusing edge to his voice told the crew he actually believed the last statement.

The commander spoke up. “Don’t be hasty.”

“Shut up.”

“I just wanted you to know that handle she’s toying with can blow the ship to bits, that’s all. Once you kill all of us, she’ll have no choice but to use it.” It wasn’t true, but the terrorists didn’t have to know that.

Annette was, however, removing the locks on the trigger used to blow the fuel control assembly, which could strand the ship for months, at the very least. Raj hoped Annette had noticed the hang-tight order and would hold off a while, since wrecking the engines might be about as suicidal as destroying the ship.

“Shut up.”

“If she doesn’t panic and do it anyway.”

“You have some particular desire to be first, cabin boy?” Shahid signaled Cyrus to make the commander the center of his attention. It was not out of the question that the commander might attempt to signal all of the hostages to rush them simultaneously, and they probably would not be able to kill more than half before being overwhelmed. Shahid wanted the commander to know he was the first target.

Raj shrugged and was quiet. A shadow of doubt drifted over Shahid’s face, as he considered his options. Shahid had never known hostages to be particularly brave or inclined to suicidal counterattacks, and doubted this lot was any different, but he had to be sure. Few methods for quelling such feelings were as effective as executing a few of their friends.

Shahid had been taught that hostages never really believe you will execute someone until they see you do it. Thus, the first is just an example. The second execution, however, they understand completely. He would have liked to have killed the commander, but the commander would be one of the people with the command codes needed to run the main engines. The first can be anyone, but for the second, choose a victim who will evoke the greatest emotion, and make their utter helplessness plain to them. He looked his captives over.

The girl in engineering was already teetering on the edge of helplessness, he judged. He checked his watch impatiently, waiting for the ten minutes to pass, and letting her think. It was important that she think. Rashness wouldn’t do. She had to accept that Shahid made the rules, and that she must comply to save her friends.

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Jan pulled a drawer open and found a box of killer grapes. She stared at them for a moment, uncertain of why they held her attention.

“Hussein, did you tell me once that there was some link between killer grapes and explosive bolts?”

“Yeah,” Hussein shouted back from across the lab. “Same voltage inverter as we use to set them off. Why?”

“Don’t ask, just go find me half a dozen nice big exploding bolts.”

Hussein launched himself from the lab as Mike looked up from his search. “Got an idea?”

Jan nodded as she examined one of the orbs. “Cruise grapes. I had to cut up one of those bolts once. The detonator is tiny, and the explosive is like putty. I think I can rig these things as little bombs.”

“I didn’t know you were an explosives expert.”

“Sure,” Jan chuckled. “My uncle used them in construction.

Told me all about them. A couple of times.”

“Great,” Mike replied dubiously. He glanced at his watch. “And not much time. No way you could do it before they kill someone.

The bridge crew’s training is to sit tight and wait for us to take action, unless we signal otherwise or fail to signal at all.”

Jan slammed her fist against the bench. “Jesus, now I know how Churchill felt when he let the Nazis bomb Coventry! If we try to gas the bridge, those bozos will just put on their masks and kill everybody. Signal our guys to rush the hijackers, and we’ll lose half, minimum. Our option is letting them kill a friend while I work on a new trick. God help me, it’s a real clear choice.”

“Given any thought to how you’ll aim them?” Mike asked.

“One of them, evidently the leader, is kind enough to have himself on an intercom camera,” Jan answered. “We try to take him out, and set off a few more charges as distractions. Maybe the bridge crew can take care of the rest of the problem themselves. Signal to hang tight and stay ready.”

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The time neared. Two of Annette’s paramours were on the bridge. Shahid’s eyes settled on the most recent. His accomplices took his meaning instantly and trained their weapons on the one named Jeremy, motioning him forward. The victim came forward, slowly and fearfully, but knowing there was nothing he could do.

“Whore, look here,” Shahid shouted at the intercom. “One of your customers. You have one minute to open the hatch, or I start ruining your business.”

She saw who it was and turned her face away.

“Look around you, harlot. See the bodies? See the drops of blood floating around, getting on everything, on you? Are you prepared to do that to your lover here? Thirty seconds, harlot.”

Soft sobs were the only sounds from the intercom.

Shahid waited half a minute in tense silence, then, at a motion of his hand, Gaffar sent an exploding shell into the man’s head. The effects, as intended, were especially gruesome.

Seconds after the execution, Dr. Thompson launched herself across the bridge at Shahid like a wrinkled old scarecrow shot from a cannon. He deflected her easily with a swipe from his weapon hand and sent her crashing into a console. As she bounced off of it and drifted slowly back, moaning, Shahid stared at his hand. It was smeared with the old woman’s blood. That seemed to anger him more. When she floated into reach, he smashed her again, sending her flying into a corner where she crumpled into an unconscious ball.

The crew seethed. They seemed almost as angry at the brutalization of the old woman as they did at the killing. The terrorists trained their weapons on the hostages to quell any building mood of heroism. Her back to them, none of the terrorists noticed Dr.

Thompson’s right hand drift over to the computer strapped to her left forearm.

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Jan was gently scraping explosive from a bolt. Mike had just finished attaching a detonator to a grape, and was waiting for Jan to hand him a fresh batch of the putty-like compound.

“What I wouldn’t give for a paper bag,” he teased.

Jan looked up for an instant. “For even thinking about it, when this is over, you’re going out an airlock.”

There was a soft beep, and a message window appeared on Jan's screen.

playing possum. can i help? doc t.

"Geez, she's on the bridge." Jan typed a reply.

yes. we're blind. indicate positions of crew and targets on floor plan. ja

Jan transmitted the bridge floor plan to Erica's computer, then exchanged information until she understood the situation. Jan informed Erica of the plan to use exploding grapes, and asked Erica if she knew how to control them.

hell yes. invented them.

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"How many more are you going to kill, whore?" Shahid motioned for Gaffar to push the bloodstained headless corpse towards him. Shahid grabbed the victim's vest as it floated by. His awkward grasp seemed as if he wished to avoid contact with the body itself. "Here, look what you have done to your lover."

She wouldn't look. Shahid did it for her. "H'mm, interesting, isn't it, how one minute a man can be a real stud, a sweaty, grunting, grabbing, living thing, prodding at your insides. The next?

Dogmeat."

She didn't move. The dead man's arm drifted upward from behind, and touched Shahid on the neck. The terrorist shoved the body away as if it threatened him. It took him several seconds to regain his composure. "Think about it, whore. How many more will you murder? Most of them are still alive, you know. Still well, and you can keep them that way. Or you can kill them."

No response. Shahid glanced at his watch.

"Six minutes, whore."

"She can't do it, you know," Commander Rajpal said through a thin veil of calm. "All of this is unnecessary." From the corner of his eye, he could see Dr. Thompson was up to something. He was glad the security team had dropped the

gas attack idea, since it was obvious the attackers had anticipated it. He longed to do something, anything, but the best thing he could do right now was to try to keep the terrorists' attention on him.

Shahid grinned at the commander as Cyrus trained an electric gun on his head. "Impossible? Oh, no. Very simple, actually. She merely has to type a few lines into her console."

Raj shook his head.

"You think, cabin boy, that your crew is outside the door ready to rush in and save the day? They are all taking a little nap. Or dead, depending on the dose."

Raj shook his head again. "Actually, I already knew that.

Annette does too. And she would not take a direct order from me to do it, because she knows we're under duress. She also knows how many people could die if she lets you take this ship. She faced everything she has to do now long ago."

Shahid stared at the commander for several seconds as if he were trying to comprehend the incomprehensible, then returned to his tirade.

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Ever so slowly, in plain sight of two of the terrorists, Erica drifted toward an overhead service hatch. The security team was standing by, ready to blow the grapes through the empty conduit, but the devices would come out in an enclosure. Hussein had tried to push the panel open with a flexible grasping tool, but the device jammed against bends in the conduit each time he pushed. Erica had to open it without being noticed. A huge drop of blood drifted by, and she realized just how much of it was around. She typed a new message into her computer.

paint them red.

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"What are you waiting for, whore? A rescue? The nearest SWAT team is about eighty-seven light-years from here. Four minutes."

Shahid scanned the hostages for his next victim. He picked a woman in her late thirties, and had her brought forward. He knew she and the girl who now complicated his mission were close, and that the crew liked the woman generally. His selection had the desired effect on the bridge crew: if the hijackers had dropped their guard for an instant, the crew would have torn them apart. The girl in engineering did not look up.

“Harlot,” he screamed at the intercom, “snap out of it. See who it is you are about to kill!”

The girl in engineering stayed huddled in a ball, and gave no response.

“Call to your friend,” Shahid whispered to his next sacrifice.

“Otherwise she will surely kill you. Plead with her. It is your only chance.”

His victim looked at him, trembling and teary-eyed. “Go to hell, murderer.”

Shahid smacked her across the face with his weapon, and cried out to the girl in engineering. Out of patience, he chopped more than two minutes off his previous schedule. “Look, whore! Watch your girlfriend die! If the c-prime system is not re-enabled in fifteen seconds, you will kill your best friend in the Universe.”

At that, Annette looked at her monitor and saw who it was. She went berserk, screaming “Paula, NO!” and buried her head in her arms. She made no move to save her friend.

Paula screamed back. “Don’t listen to them! They’re the murderers! Do what you have to do!”

Three seconds later, Shahid pulled the trigger himself.

Ten seconds later, three red grapes, burdened with all the plastic explosives they could move, floated through the service hatch. They smelled faintly of fingernail polish.

Erica rolled slowly to face the bridge. Balanced between moving too slowly and being noticed, between having her eyes closed to slits and not being able to see through the tears, between hatred, fear, and grief, she touched the keys to maneuver one grape behind the head of each terrorist.

She detonated the devices. They exploded simultaneously, taking everyone by surprise. The terrorists tumbled across the deck, crashing into the walls or floor, as the crew gathered their wits.

“Well,” Raj said after a few seconds, “don’t just float around, grab them, for Pete’s sake.”

The crew secured the three unconscious terrorists, and checked their pulses.

“This one’s dead.”

“Aw, too bad.”

“This one’s wasted too. You oughta see the back of his head.”

“Wait a minute, this one’s still alive.”

“Damn, missed one,” Erica Thompson said in disgust.

From the Confessions:

My new name means Servant of the Father of Flame. I chose it to remind me of who I have become.

I now know that we had no chance of succeeding from the start.

The reasons are many.

First, we were caught by a well laid trap. I think I know how it worked, but I will not discuss it here, for fear of compromising future security. What I will say is this: the security was far better than my contemptuous opinion led me to believe. Had that trap failed, there were probably several more which would have worked. I also suspect it was no accident that I lived. They needed the ringleader to bring back to Earth and put on trial.

The second reason we failed was the courage and compassion of the crew, a factor I didn’t just underestimate, I totally discounted.

Had we forced them to it, they certainly would have destroyed the ship. Their only chance to avoid such drastic action was to spring one of their traps. But the

trap took time to set, and I gave them precious little of it. The crewmembers we murdered laid down their lives willingly so that their crewmates would have that time. That poor woman in engineering, whom I tortured so mercilessly, watched her friends die knowing she must, rather than letting us take the ship.

I am told she has taken her own life. Evidently I was effective in convincing her that those deaths really were her responsibility. Add her death to the tally against me, as certainly as if I had pulled the trigger myself.

The compassion of the crew went far beyond dedication to each other, though. They were dedicated to humankind. Not one of them would have allowed their ship to be used for the destruction of Earth, even at the cost of a horrible death.

Recognizing that fact has led me to another realization, one which may startle even you. Most people, yourself included, would probably also be prepared to make such a sacrifice under similar circumstances. I am not referring to some noble act to save a small group of imperiled strangers, although some of you would probably sacrifice yourselves even then. I am talking about saving all of humanity from almost certain destruction. For most of you, faced with the stark facts, the equation is an easy one, even if you do not recognize it now. Sixteen billion equally worthy lives to one personally cherished existence. You could not live with your conscience if living cost you your brothers.

That equation came up negative for me. Remember that I was trained to despise much of the world's population. I would never have laid down my life for the human race. I have always been taught that you are weak, decadent, and unworthy. I believed that you were divided against one another, and that your hatred and selfishness would make it impossible for you to make such a sacrifice. I blinded myself to the fact that, due to mindless hatred, I was divided against the world.

The third reason we did not succeed is the most important. All things happen according to God's will.

When I was first put into this cell, I found in it a copy of the Koran. It was marked to a page of "The Night Journey" which contained the following passage:

And walk not the earth exultantly; certainly thou wilt never tear the earth open, nor attain the mountains in height.

I have welcomed the trial and the delay over my sentencing because it has given me an opportunity to study in some detail a document I had forsaken in favor of a false calling. What were merely words to recite before now scream at me from the pages.

“You knew us, and yet you heeded not!”

There are few sins as great as for a believer to turn away from the True Path. On virtually every page of that divine book, I find a mortal transgression I have committed. These are not vague passages I have overlooked, but basics repeated over and over again. Their truth is obvious to me now, but until now I chose to ignore them.

Did I suppose that it was the Prophet’s whimsy to begin each sura by reminding us that God is Merciful and Compassionate? How could I believe that my mission from God was exactly the opposite?

Certainly I was taught that it was my duty to defend the Faith against aggression. And I was taught that the aggression against the Faith was perpetual and universal. I was also taught that revenge and retaliation are permitted (though not recommended) under God’s Law.

It was upon these few snippets of the Truth that I based my life. I chose to overlook all the rest.

“... thou wilt never cease to light upon some act of treachery on their part, except a few of them. Yet pardon them, and forgive”

“... they will not harm you, except a little hurt.”

“... their guile will hurt you nothing.”

“Let not detestation for a people move you not to be equitable.”

“Thine it is only to deliver the message.”

Time and again the Koran reminds us that God prefers us to be forgiving and kind, and that such actions are rewarded in the Hereafter. Time and again it reminds us that aggression and persecution are condemned. Over and over we are told that there is no compulsion in religion, that God guides whom He will to

or away from belief, and that the unbelievers harm no one but themselves.

God is forgiving, to a point. He will forgive a believer who has strayed from the Path in error, if that person repents and makes amends. I was such a misguided one, until fairly recently. But when I learned that those I followed were inspired not by the Word of God, but by the worst works of the hand of mankind, guided by Satan, and when I followed still, I condemned myself to eternal damnation. You see, until the trap was sprung, I was ready to go through with the Mahdi's plans, knowing full well that they were evil. At that point I was no longer misguided, but selfishly and knowingly pursuing a base goal: peer approval. I was ready to destroy the world for a pat on the back.

Among the warnings most often repeated in the Koran is the admonition not to sell your soul for a little price.

Oh, I am repentant enough now. But religious scholars say deathbed conversions are unlikely to make up for a lifetime of hideous wrongs. God is All-Powerful. He can forgive whomever He chooses. He could certainly forgive me. I doubt He will. I say without reservation that if I were God I would condemn one such as myself to the lowest level of Gehenna. Had I been deemed worthy of saving, surely He would have changed my course, as He no doubt did for Zeid.

I do not expect to save myself from eternal damnation by making this confession, but perhaps the fires of Hell will be just a few degrees cooler for me. Certainly, compounded over eternity, that would amount to a sizeable savings.

I will also draw a scant bit of comfort in knowing that a specially constructed and especially horrible place, in a realm of unimaginable agony, awaits the one who now calls himself "Mahdi." It is not for a prophet to be fraudulent. He was warned in the Koran that pretending to write its like assures him no better a fate. Apart from that, he was prepared to destroy one of God's grander works, and with it the true followers of the Faith. We are warned that Hell is guaranteed for one who willfully slays a believer.

And so I also welcome the delay in my sentencing because I now fear what comes after death as never before. If I could make amends, undo the wrongs I have done, and thus escape eternal torment, by dying, I would do so gladly. But such are my crimes that there is hardly anything meaningful I can offer but my warnings.

While on the subject, let me say I have followed with some amusement the argument that divides you now, on whether you should impose the penalty of capital punishment. Of course you should. I should be hung, drawn, and quartered. I should be boiled in oil. I should be burned at the stake. Simultaneously, if at all possible. It is nothing compared to what awaits me afterwards. When I go, you can expect that it will be kicking and screaming. You may put it off as long as possible, if you please.

To my wayward comrades, I implore you to mend your ways.

Should any of you be considering another such foolish act of piracy, forget it. One way or another, you will certainly fail. Open your eyes, and find the Path, plain as day to those who will look.

To those I have wronged the most, the faithful followers of the Path whose name my band of assassins stole, I offer my unworthy apology for the grief I have brought upon you. You have done the correct thing by spurning that faker. He was poison to the Faith. He divided you against yourselves and against the rest of the world for his own ends, not God's. Surely you can recognize, in God's own words, his kind in the passage "had'st thou been harsh and hard of heart, they would have scattered from about thee." Had he been a Messenger of the Word, surely he would have taken this advice.

This "Mahdi" has now banished himself. Now that his plans have failed, expect him to cry foul, to say that he is persecuted and exiled.

He will call for a holy war to reinstate him. Pay him no heed, but send him away as far as you can. Perhaps it is important that he live for now, so that he has time to understand that God will be there as well. "We know we cannot escape on earth from God, nor can we elude His grasp by flight."

The rest of you people of Earth, know us, so that you can defend yourselves from our kind, for surely you will never cease to light upon some act of treachery on our part. Know that your best defense against us is to understand our goals and motives, and see to it that you cause the outcome of our actions to be exactly the opposite of what we intend. Above all, do not let us cause you to persecute those whose name we have taken. Do not exile them or conspire against them, for such actions the Koran teaches them are cause for Jihad.

Better yet, heed the warnings of the Prophet. Surely we cannot prevail against

those God has promised to uphold. Your reward will be paid in the next world, and it will be grand beyond your imagination. Fail to heed, and you will surely roast a scant level above me in Gehenna.

There, I have done about all the good possible considering the irreparable harm I have done. Go on about your business, then, but consider my warnings.

And do with me what you must.

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The Back-Story

“For a Little Price” is the previously unpublished part of a trilogy. The first story in the set is “The Devil and the Deep Black Void”, published by Analog Science Fiction and Fact in January of 1986. That was followed by “The Gardener” in Analog in November of 1993. Both of “Devil” and “Gardener” are placed on the planet Mazra’ih, a very special planet terraformed largely by Baha’i colonists. “For a Little Price” is the background story for the two published works.

The printer was evidently barely cool after sending off “Devil” when I began work on “For A Little Price.” My earliest dated manuscript bears a date of 1986, and there is one earlier than that. I wanted to tell the back-story, the attempted hijacking of a starship, a device so powerful that it could easily destroy a world. But I didn’t want this to simply be some space-opera adaptation of an airline hijacking. From the start, I wanted it to be from the hijacker’s point of view. This would make my central character possibly the most unlikable fellow ever to tell a science fiction story first-person. This, I knew, was going to be a very difficult story to tell well, the most challenging thing I had ever attempted to write. And to do it, I was going to have to both learn more about Islam, and figure out what was in the terrorist’s head, two very different things.

I was raised a Christian, but I knew, from the start, that Islam does not support terrorism. So I intended, from the start, to write the story to show that the terrorist had made a horrible mistake, and knows it in the end. I had also recently read a story by Charles Harness, “Summer Solstice”, in which the ending of the story was obvious almost from the start, yet the story was still compelling. And so I decided to start the story by revealing the ending.

I spent a couple of months digging up reference works and reviewing them, including two versions of the Koran. As I expected, I saw nothing in the Koran to support terrorism, but plenty to condemn it. The same was true of the other background material. As the “Islamic Revolution” unfolded in Iran, I had been disgusted to see how much that was going on fit better with studies I’d read of Hitler’s tactics, or with Machiavelli’s recommendations to his prince. After reading the Koran, I started to wonder if the leaders of the revolution ever had.

I wrote four versions of “For a Little Price” between 1986 and 1994, three of which were submitted to Analog. The basic story from the point of view of the terrorist changes very little in the successive versions, but the two later versions attempt to moderate his darkness by interspersing sections from the points of view of investigators or the starship crew, at the suggestion of Analog’s editor Stan Schmidt. With his rejection of “Price 4”

(1994), he suggested I eliminate the terrorist’s point of view entirely. At that point, I simply slid the drawer shut on the story, assuming it would never be published.

Finally, Ahmed Khan announced this anthology on the Analog forum, and I offered version four for his consideration. To my total amazement, he said he actually liked it, but requested I make a few relatively minor changes to make the story comply with the basic premise of the anthology. To this end, I changed one of the starship crewmembers to a Muslim, which required replacing one section, changing several paragraphs of another, and a global name change. Other than that, the story is little changed from the 1994

version, and the part of Shahid is extremely close to the original.

I think it is important that readers realize this story was not written in reaction to the sad events of September 11, 2001. Instead, having written it, the story came to my mind very vividly on that day, especially things the story says at the conclusion. On that day I already knew the perpetrators could not possibly use Islam to justify their crimes, and that we should not lash out against the Muslim world in response.

One final seed was planted in the last section. If you have read “El Dorado” (Analog, October 2007), be looking for the origin of the character Victor Gendeg.